



Persistently Pre-Modern

Dynamics of change in the world of late Pre-Modernity

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PhD Thesis

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Persistently Pre-Modern

Dynamics of Change in the World of Late Pre-Modernity

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Ainsi les histoires particulières représentent la suite des choses qui sont arrivés à un peuple dans tout leur détail. Mais afin de tout entendre, il faut savoir le rapport que chaque histoire peut avoir avec les autres, ce qui se fait par un abrégé où l'on voit comme d'un coup d'œil tout l'ordre des temps.

Particular histories show the sequence of events that have occurred in a nation in all their detail. But in order to understand everything, we must know what connection that history might have with others; and that can be done by a condensation in which we can perceive, as in one glance, the entire sequence of time.

- Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, 1681

Mais, lui dis-je, si parmi tant de matériaux bruts et informes, vous choisissiez de quoi vous faire un édifice à votre usage; si en retranchant tous les détails des guerres aussi ennuyeux qu'infidèles, toutes les petites négociations qui n'ont été que des fourberies inutiles, toutes les aventures particulières que étouffent les grands événements; si en conservant celles qui peignent les mœurs, vous faisiez de ce chaos un tableau général et bien arrêté; si vous cherchiez à démêler dans les événements l'histoire de l'esprit humain, croiriez-vous avoir perdu votre temps?

But, I said to her, if, in this vast amount of raw material, you selected what will allow you to build something for your own use; if you omitted all the details of each war, which are as boring as they are uncertain; if you omitted all the small negotiations, which turned out to be useless treachery; all the particular incidents, which obliterate the great events; if, keeping what pertains to manners, you turned this chaos into a general and definite picture; if you tried to tease out the story of the human mind from these events; do you think it would be a waste of your time?

- Voltaire, *Essai sur les Mœurs*, 1754

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Preface

This thesis has been made possible by the Danish state and the University of Copenhagen, which through its generous grant of an open stipend for three years of PhD research enabled me to delve deep into my field of interest. Already severely limited, since the beginning of my employment the destructive policies of successive Danish governments have resulted in the further reduction of the opportunities for young academics to engage in enriching humanistic research of topics deemed irrelevant to the cold logics of market utility. With no end in sight for this civilizational and cultural immiseration, I fear for the future of my colleagues and friends at the SAXO institute, and for the fate of the humanities in my country.

Even in such a solitary endeavor as the writing of a PhD thesis, I have received help from many people, all of whom I would like to thank. Peter Fibiger Bang, as my supervisor, mentor, and friend, has provided invaluable inspiration for my work, as well as many a thought-provoking discussion, through more than a decade. Similarly, my colleagues at the research project “Rome in the World History of Universal Empire”, Karsten Johanning, Kristian Kanstrup Christensen, and Jacob Tullberg, has provided both support, commentary, and a stimulating environment for my research. Without them, the previous three years would have been considerably less enjoyable. My thanks also extend to my fellow PhD students at the SAXO institute, who have offered both valuable commentary and social support; to Nicolai Bagger, whose thorough readings of my work provided greatly valuable input; to Dingxin Zhao, for his invitation to a research stay at the University of Chicago; to Stuart Ward, Head of Department of the SAXO institute, for his attempts to reform this arcane institution; and finally to Mette and Lea, my wife and daughter, for reminding me of the essential unimportance of academic work in the great scheme of things.

Introduction

Le détail méthodique de la doctrine chinoise ... mérite de servir de modèle à tous les États.

The methodical detail of the Chinese doctrine ... should serve as a model for all states.

- François Quesnay, *Le Despotisme de la Chine*, 1767

These years, it seems, China is everywhere. Four decades into the reform movement begun by Deng Xiaoping, China has finally entered the global community and reclaimed its prominence as one of the leading powers on the international scene. An uncountable number of books with titles such as “When China Rules the World”, “China goes Global”, and “China Rising” seems to come forward every year, trumpeting its arrival.¹ And business leaders, politicians, and commentators constantly remind us of the opportunities and dangers emanating from the East. For many a leader and pundit “The China Model” seems to offer an interesting alternative to the ideals of Western Liberal Democracy.²

Three centuries ago, a similar fascination with China engulfed Europe. Jesuit missionaries returned from China with wondrous tales of an enormous, glorious, and well-ordered empire. Merchant ships arrived in European ports carrying hugely popular Chinese luxuries, such as silk, tea and porcelain. And leading intellectuals of the age, among them Voltaire, J.H.G. Justi and François Quesnay, wrote books praising China, and arguing for the strategic emulation of the Chinese social order.³ In China, as we see in the quote above, was found an inspiring model for the construction of ideal societies.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, however, between these two instances of European Sino-mania, China was largely forgotten. As Europeans were busy constructing a modern, industrial world, China did not seem to offer anything other than a textbook example of a stagnant society, trapped in the obscurity of tradition. If any “China Model” was ever mentioned, it

¹ Jacques, *When China Rules the World*; Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*; Liu, *China Rising*.

² Bell, *The China Model*.

³ Lee, *China and Europe*.

was only to provide a contrast to European society, a stagnant, poor, irrational, and oppressive *other* to the dynamic, rich, rational and free Western civilization.

The 19th and 20th centuries were also the time when the modern historical and sociological sciences were established, and so the overwhelmingly negative view of China was carried into these fields. In the construction of a modern World History, China was placed at the sidelines, outside of the main narrative of historical progression. The view of China was that of a static, self-sufficient culture, withdrawn and isolated by its own willing from the rest of the world.

With the coming of the recent wave of Sino-mania to the historical sciences, this picture seems to finally be changing. The Chinese historical experience is again recognized to form an indispensable part of World History, and scholars are now turning their efforts toward the daunting task of incorporating East and West into a unified, world historical framework.

This thesis forms my attempt at contributing modestly to this task. It follows in the footsteps of those great thinkers of the 18th century who saw in China a society worth studying for understanding the European societies of their time. As they did, I will here use Chinese society as a model of social organization that can provide insight into the nature of contemporaneous European societies, and in the nature of world historical development more generally. However, we differ in that my use of a China Model is not intended as a normative prescription for social development, but as a merely descriptive one. The triumphalist Sino-centrism evident in many modern works of Global History, echoing the moralizing voices of the 18th-century thinkers, does no good to the field. It is in the sober, disinterested (as far as that can be practiced) introduction of the Chinese experience to world historical problematics, that we can find value.

Even though 18th-century thinkers like Voltaire presented a quite idealized picture of Chinese society, they were not merely inventing a utopia like that of Thomas More. From the writings of the Jesuits they recognized that China provided an example of an advanced society comparable to their own, and governed by similar social dynamics. In their pre-modern frameworks of mind, China did not constitute an inescapable *other*, but a society dealing with similar problems, subject to the same limitations that

European societies were struggling with.⁴ Only the specific solutions were different (and by their account, superior).

This deep truth of pre-modern comparability was temporarily lost with the onset of modernity. But it is precisely the fact of comparability that makes the study of Chinese history useful for understanding European history of the age of Voltaire. Beneath all the superficial differences, Europe and China remained essentially agrarian, organic societies, and the same pre-modern dynamics of change shaped both worlds.⁵ These fundamental, pre-modern dynamics are the true objects of this thesis.

The study of large-scale phenomena

How can we study such general and abstract things as pre-modern dynamics of change? Seen one way, it seems the height of arrogance to assume to contribute to such a large problem in such a limited format as that of a PhD thesis. To this, I must plead partially guilty. However, I would argue that there is something to be said for the reasonableness of such an endeavor.

Like in any other field of scholarship, progress in history has generally involved continuous specialization of scholars into ever more narrow fields of inquiry. Overall, this is both a necessary and good development, as it results in the deepening of historical knowledge and the continued refinement and nuancing of earlier scholarship. But the continuous specialization also produces a dilemma for the contextualization and integration of the produced knowledge. As historians delve into the study of narrowly defined times and places, they achieve increasingly idiosyncratic understandings of their historical subject. Historical reality is irreducibly complex, so any deeper exploration of a historical process will inevitably discover exceptions, irregularities and counterpoints to any theorization. The closer you come to total knowledge of a concrete historical phenomenon, the harder it becomes to contextualize and situate in a broader framework.⁶

⁴ Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change* argued the same point with reference to the classical economists.

⁵ See also Wrigley for the essentiality of the distinction between “organic” and “mineral-based” economies.

⁶ Cf. Hall, *Powers and Liberties*, chap. 1.

But context and broad frameworks are just as necessary for historical scholarship as ideographic knowledge.⁷ In order to resolve what the broader meanings of specific historical phenomena are, you have to look outside of the local setting, and place it in a broader framework. Comparison and contextualization also provide a crucial corrective for idiosyncratic explanations of local historical developments, as it enables us to look closer into cause and effect, and to weigh the relative importance of different factors of change.⁸

All too often, historians trained in the tradition of detailed archival studies refrain from engaging directly with these larger frameworks, as they feel they have no educational basis from which to engage them.⁹ When historians do venture into the realm of broader synthesis, it is often only after a long career engaged in local historical studies, which then tends to serve as the place from which they form their broader thoughts. Alternatively, the task is left for the sociologists, who share no such compunctions. It is thus historical sociologists, from Marx and Weber to Charles Tilly and Michael Mann, who has provided most of the great works of historical synthesis.

In this thesis, I therefore take a somewhat unusual approach. Moving in a different direction than that of increased specialization, I aim to tackle a number of large-scale problematics head on. In this brief space, I deal with broad geographical areas, long timeframes, and multiple subjects. Inevitably, much detail and sophistication is lost along the way, but I hope to show that something is to be gained as well. By starting out relatively ‘unburdened’ by ideographic knowledge, to use a well-placed euphemism, I hope there is more room for generalities. And though this thesis remains heavily indebted to historical sociology, as will be clear along the way, it aims to keep its grounding as a historical study, retaining a place for the historically specific and unique.

Ultimately though, any practicable study must involve some narrowing of its field and scope. However widely one may wish to spread one’s arms, every inquiry must remain limited, and this thesis is no exception, though

⁷ For a discussion of the importance of world historical contextualization, see Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*

⁸ Cf. Bloch, “Pour Une Histoire Comparée Des Sociétés Européennes.”

⁹ Kocka and Haupt, “Comparison and Beyond,” 13–5.

it is placed at the wide end of the spectrum. My way of entry into the study of large-scale, pre-modern dynamics is dealt with in the following sections.

Defining the problem

On a general level, this thesis deals with dynamics of change in pre-modern society. Specifically, it deals with the problem of how to interpret developments in the realms of economy, state formation and the formation of social elites in the century and a half preceding the industrial revolution, from the middle of the 17th century to the end of the 18th century. This is done through a comparative study of the relevant developments in three historical polities – Qing China, Bourbon France, and the Austrian Habsburg Empire.¹⁰ In broad terms, I argue that developments observed in all three fields of study can be largely accounted for in terms of the continuous workings of essentially pre-modern dynamics shared by all three societies. Consequently, I argue that we should abandon the framework of modernization that has traditionally provided the structure for historical scholarship of the period.

The Great Divergence and beyond

The problems dealt with in this thesis are in important ways connected to what has become known as The Great Divergence-debate. This debate, with its name derived from a book published in 2000 by Kenneth Pomeranz, constitutes the most recent iteration of the recurrent investigation of the question of why and how modernity emerged, and why it did so specifically in Europe.¹¹ In the past two decades, the problem of “why Europe?” has been enlivened by the challenge to traditional interpretations coming from a group of scholars customarily referred to as the ‘California School’, as many of them worked out of Californian institutions. Grounding their work in structured comparisons between China on the one side and either Britain or Europe as a whole on the other, the ‘Californians’ argued that the Eurasian world up to as late as 1750 or 1800 remained a “world of surprising resemblances”.¹² The Great Divergence between

¹⁰ From here on, the Austrian branch of the Habsburg domains will be referred to simply as the ‘Habsburg Empire’.

¹¹ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

¹² Pomeranz, 29; Important works of the California School include Wong, *China Transformed*, 1997; Frank, *ReOrient*; Li, *Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850*; Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World*; Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*; Goody, *The Theft of History*; Goldstone, *Why Europe?*; Flynn and Giráldez, *China and the Birth of Globalization in the 16th Century*.

East and West, they generally argued, occurred late, as a result of limited and specific contingencies and thus not as the result of a general developmental trend.

The claims of the California School naturally invited a great amount of critical response.¹³ Most forceful among the critics was perhaps Peer Vries, who responded by issuing two large volumes consisting of detailed comparisons of state and economy between Britain and China in the ‘long 18th century’, and concluded that the world remained a “world of striking differences”.¹⁴ By the late 2010’s the debate seems to have lost much of its earlier vigor, with a synthesis beginning to emerge out of the rubble.¹⁵

The Great Divergence-debate has pushed comparative studies of the East and West far ahead, and much of this thesis relies on the insights produced by the participating scholars. However, the overall structure of the debate was also characterized by a number of methodological problems specifically relating to the objects of comparison. As a rule, the debate has focused on comparing China with either Britain or Europe as a whole, which presents us with a problem regarding the representativeness of the studies.

In fact, one conclusion to come out of the debate was that Britain was clearly quite exceptional in many aspects of its economic and political development. Often, other European examples, especially France, are drawn into the debate to highlight the unique developmental path of Britain. This is of course in itself unproblematic, but it becomes questionable when British developments are subsequently used as a stand-in for European development more generally. A particularly clear example of this is to be found in Linda Weiss and John Hobson’s 1995 *States and Economic Development*. In a section titled “The emergence of the strong state”, Weiss and Hobson compare French and British central governments to show how the British state developed extraordinary capacities to appropriate societal resources. A couple of pages later, the ‘European’ state is compared to the Chinese, which they argue “contrasted clearly” with the former. However,

¹³ E.g. Huang, “Development or Involution”; Brenner and Isett, “England’s Divergence from China’s Yangzi Delta”; Bryant, “The West and the Rest Revisited”; Elvin, “Defining the Explicanda”; Vries, “The California School.”

¹⁴ Vries, *Escaping Poverty*, quotation from p. 410; Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*.

¹⁵ Some early examples of the emerging synthesis can be found in Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence*; Goldstone, “Divergence in Cultural Trajectories”; Li and Zanden, “Before the Great Divergence?” See also the articles in *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 12, no. 2 (2015).

the numbers for relative tax efficiency they use as a basis for this contrast is actually *the same* for the French and Chinese examples.¹⁶ Inadvertently, Weiss and Hobson thus come to use Britain as a stand-in for Europe, despite their previous use of France as a contrasting case for British achievements.

This example in Weiss and Hobson admittedly is quite extreme, but it illustrates a general point. However much these Britain-China comparisons help us understand the emergence of modernity *in Britain*, they tell us very little about social development in the rest of Europe. Until well into the processes of industrialization, there was simply no single ‘European’ developmental path. As Vries puts it “There is no such thing as a ‘rising Europe’.”¹⁷

In this thesis, I have responded to this insight by moving my focus away from Britain to a different set of comparanda. While keeping China as the basis for comparison, I have moved the European side of the comparison to polities seldom used as European models in their own right, France and the Habsburg Empire. Although not commonly used, there are good reasons for choosing these in particular.

Continental empires

The choice of Britain, the birthplace of the industrial revolution, makes eminent sense if what we want to study are the reasons for the emergence of modernity. But for the very same reasons, if we want to study the dynamics of the pre-modern world, we need to look elsewhere. If we want to focus our study on the centers of importance for the *pre-modern* European world, France and the Habsburg Empire seem the ideal candidates.

In the centuries leading up to the industrial revolution, these two empires were the dominant players on the European continent. In terms of size and population, with both states approaching 30 million subjects by the end of the 18th century, they outranked every other European power by several factors. Politically, until the ‘diplomatic revolution’ of 1756, it was the struggles between these two great powers that shaped the fate of the continent. And in terms of prestige, it was to Versailles and (to a lesser degree) Vienna that European rulers and elites looked for inspiration, patronage, and cultural sophistication.

¹⁶ Weiss and Hobson, *States and Economic Development*, 42–50.

¹⁷ Vries, “Replies to My Commentators.”

France and the Habsburg Empire also make sense to use in a comparison with China because of the similar status of all three as continental, agrarian empires.¹⁸ Although France, unlike China or the Habsburg Empire, did engage in overseas colonial ventures, their overseas colonies never attained anything near the importance of its European possessions, in the way that it would for Britain or the Dutch Republic. France remained primarily a continental empire, dominated by its agricultural sector. And so, less controversially, did China and the Habsburg Empire.

The common structure of these three societies facilitates comparison between them. It also makes any conclusions reached on the basis of this comparison less valid for other types of societies, such as city-states or truly sea-borne empires, but that is an acceptable price to pay, given that continental, agrarian empires seem to have been the dominant form of social organization throughout pre-modern history.¹⁹

Choice of time-frame and the early modern

The time-frame of this study, as previously mentioned, I have defined as c. 1650-1800, though sometimes with a slightly 'long tail' at the beginning. There are several reasons for that choice. Firstly, as I will discuss more thoroughly in the following chapter, being the period leading up to the industrial revolution makes it central for the study of precisely where the limits of the modern lie. Interpretations of development in this period are to a great extent colored by the expectations of a budding modernity. By focusing on this contested space, there is more to gain from showing the continued predominance of pre-modern dynamics of change.

Secondly, as luck would have it, the period between the mid-17th and the late 18th centuries is a period of remarkable similarities across our three cases. All three experienced substantial social and state breakdowns in the period leading up to 1650, which resulted in a considerable social reorganization. The following century and a half was a period of state consolidation, elite reorganization, and from the 18th century also economic and demographic expansion. By the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, all three societies again came to experience major social and political problems, and their economic and political trajectories diverged sharply. The stable and relatively similar experiences of the period c. 1650-

¹⁸ See chapter 4 for a discussion of my use of the term 'empire' to describe European polities.

¹⁹ Haldon and Goldstone, "Ancient States, Empires, and Exploitation," 17–9.

1800 make the task of comparison between our cases much easier, and help focus the study on large-scale trends rather than specific events.

Breaking off the study at the momentous events around the end of the 18th century may seem problematic in that it is precisely there we see a substantial divergence between our three cases. Indeed, it can be argued, it is only there that we can observe the natural end-points of the dynamics I seek to explore, and so by refraining from dealing with it, I artificially create the conditions of similarity that I wish to argue for. This objection has some merit, and can only be incompletely addressed. However, I would argue that we cannot assume that later developments grow naturally out of earlier ones, and they therefore should give form to our understanding of the preceding period. The point of this study is precisely to show how far up in time we can follow the workings of pre-modern dynamics of change, and that implies a radical discontinuity between the premodern 18th century and the modern developments that followed it. Here, I ask only to save the objection for later, and follow my argument through.

Themes of comparison

The central themes of comparison of this thesis are as mentioned economic development, state formation and elite formation. Each of these is dealt with in a separate chapter. Each chapter includes the discussion of important previous research on the field, which due to the breadth of the study would be too diffuse and unwieldy to treat together, as well as the presentation of important theoretical models. The separation of these three themes is a purely practical matter. In reality, all three are so closely intertwined as to make any separation very difficult. This is recognized here by the fact that each chapter regularly refers to developments described in other chapters. As a practical matter, the distinctions nevertheless remain analytically meaningful.

The themes of economy, state, and elites are chosen because of the traditionally supposed importance of each to the emergence of the modern world. As such, they have been the central objects of inquiry for studies on the Great Divergence during the past two decades and essentially all the way back to Marx and Weber. As the central battlegrounds for discussions of emergent modernity, they are likewise the natural objects of study for the present attempt to show the continued importance of pre-modern dynamics. By dealing with the themes most influenced by the expectations of modernity, as discussed in the following chapter, any conclusion

reached regarding the explanatory power of pre-modern frameworks will stand out so much the stronger.

A subject conspicuously absent in this thesis, due to its equally strong claim to be central for the emergence of modernity, is the areas of technology, science, and cultural and intellectual history. However, there are reasons for their absence as well. It is far from the case that I disregard their importance for modernity. As the debate on the Great Divergence has proceeded, older economic and materialist explanations for the onset of modernity have gradually come to give way to more cultural and intellectual explanations. This insight has come from a variety of scholars on all sides of the debate, and I fully support their conclusions.²⁰ But what I believe to be equally clear is that developments in these areas did not matter greatly for either economy, state or elites on the Eurasian continent until at a very late time in history. The world of the 17th and 18th centuries was not made in the minds of Grotius, Bodin, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Smith, Newton, or anyone else of the thinkers usually connected with intellectual modernity. What I hope to show is that state, economy, and social structure instead evolved gradually in a still pre-modern world, following pre-modern dynamics. And they evolved to be stable in that world, not to create another.

Comparative methodology

Given the comparative nature of this project, a short discussion of the methodological issues related to this form of study is necessary. Due to the inherent tendencies toward specialization of historical scholarship, as discussed above, the comparative method has remained somewhat peripheral to the field. But as Marc Bloch already remarked in the late 1920's, comparison is an essential tool for dealing with explanation of historical phenomena.²¹ It is, in fact, the only method of testing explanatory hypotheses in historical scholarship, as historians cannot make use of the experimental method common to other sciences. So, since this thesis aims to

²⁰ E.g. Vries, *Escaping Poverty*; Goldstone, "Divergence in Cultural Trajectories"; Pomeranz, "Ten Years After"; McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity*; Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*; Elvin, "Defining the Explicanda"; Jacob, *Scientific Culture*.

²¹ Bloch, "Pour Une Historie Comparée Des Sociétés Européennes"; For a succinct condensation of Bloch's views, see Sewell, "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History."

explain historical phenomena in terms of general, pre-modern dynamics, the comparative method is essential here.

Comparative studies are generally used in two ways – what Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt identify as the ‘contrasting type’ and the ‘universalizing type’.²² The contrasting comparison seeks to explain divergent development by focusing on elements of difference between the compared cases, while the universalizing comparison seeks to establish general patterns and theories of development. Though in practice most studies involve some mixing of both strategies, often one can be identified as dominant in any given study. Most of the literature on the Great Divergence, given its explicit goal of investigating the causes for the emergence of the modern world, employs mainly contrastive comparison. This thesis, with its goal of establishing a common framework for pre-modern development, is an example of a universalizing comparison.

The comparative method is connected with a number of methodological problems. First is the inherent danger of over-generalization. When looking at historical development across several societies, especially in a universalizing framework, very different phenomena easily come to be flattened into an overly generalized pattern, losing their individuality in the process. An example of this kind of over-generalization is the overzealous application of Marxist notions of ‘feudalism’ to widely different societies, squeezing every phenomenon to fit into the general model. As generalization is a necessity for comparative research, this problem can only be tackled by continually weighing the benefits and problems of each explanatory model, and by a willingness to continually refine or discard these models where necessary.

Second is the problem potentially arising from treating each object of comparison, or ‘society’, as a black box, independent of external and inter-case influences.²³ In the context of this study, how do we distinguish between whether a similar development is caused by common underlying dynamics, or the result of interaction between societies? However, the scale of the phenomena studied here makes this problem less pressing. In a longer time-frame, the concrete way in which a model of organization is introduced is less relevant than the question of how or why it could remain effective or stable, which points back to deeper structural dynamics. For

²² Kocka and Haupt, “Comparison and Beyond,” 2–3.

²³ See Werner and Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison.”

example, the question of whether European observations of Chinese society influenced social organization in Europe is of course interesting in its own right, but what really matters for this study is the structural similarities between China and Europe that made imitation of China seem feasible to these observers. Here, I distance myself from the growing trend of ‘connected-’ ‘transnational-’, ‘transfer-’ or ‘entangled histories’, which takes global interaction as the object of study.²⁴

A third problem lies in the choice of units of comparison. Even as I here follow the usual pattern of taking states as the primary units of comparison, there is no reason to expect state boundaries to coincide neatly with self-contained economic units or arenas of elite interaction. Additionally, there are also obvious problems with comparing the continent-sized China with the much smaller European states, as the former will inevitably be far more diverse than the latter.²⁵ For the sake of structure, I have nevertheless opted to keep the state territories as the boundaries of my study throughout the thesis, and this constitutes a limiting factor for my work.

The fourth and last problem dealt with here concerns what should be regarded as the basis for comparison. The traditional procedure for East-West comparison has been to lay out European developments as the basic pattern, to which Chinese developments then have been compared, asserting similarities and differences. In his book *China Transformed*, R. Bin Wong forcefully criticized this strategy for privileging European developments as ‘normal’, while Chinese developments came to be seen as less successful deviations from European norms.²⁶ For Wong, the solution was to be found in a ‘reciprocal comparison’, where each side of the comparison is respectively interpreted in light of the other.²⁷ This enabled a kind of theoretical equalization, with both sides seen as deviations in relation to each other. This thesis can be said to go a step further than Wong, and consistently uses China as the basis to which France and the Habsburg Empire are compared. As the European experience is so ingrained in our historical understanding, I believe we can still learn much from focusing solely on

²⁴ See Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories”; Saunier, *Transnational History*; Espagne, *Les Transferts Culturels Franco-Allemands*; Werner and Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison.”

²⁵ This was a central methodological point of Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

²⁶ Wong, *China Transformed*, 1997.

²⁷ See also Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 8–10.

China as an instructive example, without necessarily having to rehash older perspectives as well.

Sources

A study of this breadth places severe limitations on the use of source material. Departing from historical convention, I have confined myself to use secondary sources only, basing my study on the research of other scholars more specialized in the relevant fields. Due to the scope of the study, primary sources would, in any case, only have served as cherry-picked illustrations and not contributed critically to my conclusions. Another limitation lies in the linguistic capabilities required for a study of this scope. I have opted to use primarily English-language scholarship for the basis of my comparison, though also a good deal of French and some German scholarship has been included. Inevitably, some distortions will result from this limitation.

One problem concerns the unequal nature of this limitation on the three cases of this study. On the one hand, the history of 17th and 18th century France has been thoroughly worked through by French and Anglophone scholars, with countless general works producing a host of theorizations on the economic, political and social dynamics of this period. Contemporary China, on the other hand, has attracted considerably less Western scholarship, and so I have at certain points had to rely on fairly dated material in my research. However, this problem has been somewhat ameliorated by scholarship produced in the context of the Great Divergence-debate, which has brought forth a great amount of new material.

The Habsburg Empire presents an even more difficult case than China. Due to the dismemberment of the Habsburg lands following World War I, no contemporary state stands as the inheritor of the Habsburg tradition. Scholarship has unfortunately been similarly divided into separate German, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Italian traditions, among many more, requiring an extreme linguistic talent to overcome. Consequently, very few works of synthesis have been produced. In addition, syntheses have tended to focus on the periods either before the 17th century, the period of the Austro-Spanish Habsburg world empire, or after the 18th century, seen as a period of decline in the face of emerging nationalisms. Faced with these limitations, the Habsburg part of my comparison is at times not as detailed as I would have liked it to be. However, I believe the inclusion of the Habsburg experience has still proved very valuable to my arguments.

Even though it has of necessity assumed the part of a 'lesser partner' for comparison, it retains a vital importance as the corrective 'third case' necessary to establish generalizable typologies.²⁸

Problems of this type are of course inherent to large-scale comparison. In this vein, Jeroen Duindam observes that "The problem of such generalizing studies is that they necessarily rely on secondary literature, sometimes using outdated views as the basis for generalized claims", and argues instead for the format of edited volumes, drawing on contributions by experts from specific fields.²⁹ But such anthologies generally suffer from a lack of direct comparison, and often become just a collection of parallel narratives not contributing significantly to each other.³⁰ Problems are inherent in any format of research, and the hope for this thesis is merely that these can be outweighed by the insights produced by engaging with large-scale comparison directly.

In fact, one could argue that since the complex nature of history makes the possible scope of ideographic detail infinite, this problem of comparative research is simply a reflection of a general problem of historical scholarship. Any study, on any scale of time and place, makes use of generalizations, simplifications, and only a limited amount of sources. This problem only seems more aggravating on the larger scales because local specialists exist who can point out idiosyncrasies and exceptions to the generalized pattern. But few would argue that we should only study micro-history and refrain from generalizations at all. It is a mistake to privilege more detailed, local levels of historical explanation as inherently more 'true' than macro-historical levels of explanation. Instead, we should recognize that there is an inherent value to every level of explanation, from the most narrow to the broadest. Sometimes, in the words of Joseph Fletcher, "to see the picture in the mosaic of microhistory, one must step back from it."³¹

But to be clear, I must repeat the usual apologies offered by practitioners of universalizing comparison: as this thesis deals with large-scale processes across widely different areas, it can treat each with only undeserved super-

²⁸ See Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 7.

²⁹ Duindam, "Early Modern Europe," 615.

³⁰ Cf. Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*, 1:37.

³¹ Fletcher, "Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500-1800," 37–8.

ficiality. Any reader with expertise in any of the relevant fields will undoubtedly discover many imprecisions, unjustified generalizations, and innumerable glaring omissions. For this, I sincerely apologize. However, I am also hopeful that nevertheless, even the most expert reader will find something of use in the perspectives offered here.

A note on translation, concepts and style

When engaging in comparative studies, one encounters the problem of how to render diverse historically defined concepts, titles, and names into a comparative framework. While it is usually deemed acceptable to translate the Chinese title of *Huángdì* (皇帝) as ‘emperor’, other translations, such as the use of ‘gentry’ for the Chinese civil elites, arouse more suspicion. As a rule, I have opted to translate as much as possible into comparable Anglophone terms. This comes at the cost of a degree of precision, but helps readers unfamiliar with the specificities of Chinese, French, or ‘Habsburg’ culture attain a greater understanding of the bigger picture.

A similar problem pertains to the use of historically situated analytical concepts to describe different historical phenomena, such as using ‘the state’ to describe a variety of pre-modern political systems. I do this unapologetically, from the understanding that analytical concepts should be used as loose, heuristic tools, rather than as analytical straitjackets. In this, I may incur the wrath of the more philologically minded reader but this is a price I am happy to pay.

I would like to include a final comment on style. At various places in this thesis, I have slipped into a somewhat polemical style. I do not want to apologize for that, since it is only a reflection of my passion for historical scholarship. What I will say is that the scholars subjected to this kind of criticism here tend to be the ones that have inspired me the most. In the world of academia, criticism is really a form of praise. So, if anyone should want to criticize this work, as I have done to others, I would feel tremendously honored.

Overview of the thesis

The plan of this thesis is as follows. Having presented the broad outlines of my research here, chapter 2 delves into a theoretical discussion of the relation between world historical frameworks and the problem of modernity. I broadly argue for the destructive effects of ‘modernocentric’ history

on our understanding of the workings of the pre-modern world, and present my vision of a conceptual 'late pre-modernity'.

Three chapters follow, which constitute the core of my comparative analysis of economic, state and elite dynamics in the 17th and 18th centuries across China, France, and the Habsburg Empire. Chapter 3 deals with developments in the economic sphere. I here follow Pomeranz in arguing that the major developments of demographic expansion, commercialization and growth of manufacture observed in this period are broadly comparable across the studied cases. Furthermore, I argue that these developments can be usefully interpreted as a continuation of pre-modern trends through the application of a developmental framework largely taken from the work of Ester Boserup, but expanded to encompass change in the commercial and manufactural sectors.³²

In chapter 4, I turn to the processes of state formation. The 17th and 18th centuries saw both signs of convergence and divergence between state forms and dynamics in China on the one side, and France and the Habsburg Empire on the other. In the broad outlines of state formation, we see the French and Habsburg states increasingly converge on the Chinese pattern of the 'Bureaucratic-Imperial State'. Simultaneously, in terms of extractive and military capacities per inhabitant, the trajectories of France and the Habsburg Empire sharply diverged from that of the Chinese state. I argue, however, that both of these convergent and divergent patterns can be situated in a pre-modern framework of state formation, and that we thus should not see the observed divergences as evidence of the emergence of the modern state in Europe.

Chapter 5 builds on the conclusions of the previous two chapters and analyzes patterns of elite formation in the context of changes in the economic and political spheres. Due to the observed convergent development of the Bureaucratic-Imperial State, we see a similar convergence in the field of state-elite interaction, both in the civil and military spheres. Additionally, shared processes of commercialization in the economic domain induced similar changes in the economic role of social elites, who became increasingly oriented toward the market. Nevertheless, in no case do we observe anything like the rise of a bourgeoisie, as elite status continued to be based primarily on landed wealth and political privilege.

³² Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*; See also Boserup, *Population and Technological Change*.

In a final chapter, I bring all these insights together to argue for the continued predominance of pre-modern dynamics of change across all three societies throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and to discuss how these dynamics can be fitted into a world historical framework transcending the conceptual boundaries between East and West.

The problem of modernity

La prévention où la plupart des hommes sont pour leur temps et pour leur nation, est donc une source féconde en mauvaises remarques comme en mauvais jugements.

The bias most humans have in favor of their own time and their own nation is therefore the source of many poor remarks and poor judgments.

- Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions Critiques*, 1719

In recent decades, a great amount of work has been done to rid modern World History of the blinders of traditional Eurocentrism. However, years of deconstructive effort has left us in the unsatisfactory position of having no real framework for understanding world history. The arduous task before us of reconstructing a truly global history is still in its early phase, and all too often scholarship either slips back into the comfort of the traditional vision, or retreats into a postmodern rejection of metanarrative itself.

But however condemned, grand narratives are simply an inescapable fact of historical scholarship, and continue to color contemporary research. Nowhere is this more evident than in the global history of the so-called “early modern” era. The attempts of the last decades at globalizing early modern history, that is, at including non-European experiences into a coherent historical structure, continue to present problems of interpretation, at times appearing to exacerbate confusion rather than provide explanation.

The inclusion of the Chinese historical experience into World History has proved an especially serious conundrum to the traditional interpretation of history. Already from the time of the Song dynasty (960-1279), Chinese state and society evidenced a plethora of phenomena traditionally thought to be reserved for early modern Europe: absolutist government, professional bureaucracy, regular taxation, flourishing commerce, gunpowder warfare, technological innovation, book printing, and large iron and coal industries. Broadly speaking, two interpretations of the significance of these phenomena have been proposed: Traditionally minded scholars have tried to understate them, or at best conceded that they represented a short-lived exception of creativity in an otherwise largely stagnant society – whether because of political or ideological conservatism, or because it

was stuck in a “high-level equilibrium trap”.³³ By contrast, revisionist scholars have interpreted the presence of these phenomena as proof that the development of modernity was a global, rather than European, phenomenon, and championed the concept of an “early modern China”. As I will argue in this chapter, both of these avenues of interpretation are mistaken, or at least in need of serious qualification.

However, as the problem of “where to put China” can be seen as an example of the clash between traditional European analytical categories and World History taken seriously, this can ultimately prove extremely productive in causing us to question and revise our basic historical frameworks. The reason for the inadequacy of the interpretations mentioned, I will argue, comes from their failure to challenge at a deeper level the more general structure of World History itself: World History as the origin story of modernity. To construct a global history free from the biased teleology inherent in the current structure, it is an essential task to question its deeper assumptions, including the nature of modernity itself, and the role of modernity as the central protagonist of history.

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the phenomenon of modernity and how it has been historically conceptualized. I then show how the emerging postcolonial critique has severely problematized these conceptualizations, but without producing credible alternatives. Subsequently I argue that these complications stem from problems in our greater historical framework. I end with a discussion of alternative ways to conceptualize world historical change in the context of pre-modernity.

Modernity as phenomenon and concept

The concept of modernity appears to mean a great many things to a great many people. First, it is an epochal concept, referring to the current historical period as distinct from earlier times, variously defined as beginning at almost any point from 1492 until roughly 1800. Second, it refers to a specific trait of a given society, institution, or phenomenon, the presence of which can be questioned and empirically analyzed – for example, a modern economy is one based on industrial production and, perhaps, capitalism.³⁴ Modernity is thus both an *epochal* and an *analytic* concept. As I will show, these two conceptual meanings are closely interrelated, and this

³³ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*.

³⁴ Wittrock, “Modernity: One, None or Many?,” 31.

leads to particular challenges in the scholarly attempt to construct a global history of the early modern world.

The epochal concept of modernity has its roots in the tripartite model of history advocated by European renaissance scholars, organizing history into the three periods of antiquity, middle ages and modernity. As used originally, modernity was both backward- and forward-looking: it was used to separate the disparaged medieval period from both the present and the perceived glory of antiquity, which was seen as finally reborn after a long sleep. At the same time, modernity also implied the creation of something new; that history had entered a period radically different from what came before. In the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* which was played out the following centuries, these two understandings were furiously opposed, but slowly the second interpretation, of the modern world as an improvement upon earlier times, came to dominate. Modernity was thus from early in its inception a concept that emphasized its own rupture with the past - to claim that you lived in the modern age was to stress a radical difference between that and the world before it.

As well as referring to a certain *time*, the epochal concept of modernity was also connected to a certain *place*. Just as the concept of a Tudor period only makes sense within Britain, the concept of modernity, like the rest of the tripartite model, was created to provide structure to the history of Europe, or more broadly the Christian community of its creators. Modernity was thus born as an ideographic, historical concept without explicit claims to universality.

However, under the critical scrutiny of contemporary scholars, any periodization becomes reliant on analytical arguments in order to retain validity. The assertion that any specific time, rather than another, constitutes the beginning of a modern period has to be grounded in empirical analysis of what can be said to be modern. And this makes the epochal concept of modernity completely dependent on more universal, analytical ideas. In the words of Wolfgang Reinhard, "*A simple concept of a period in history is always a reduced kind of theory of history*".³⁵ Thus, when working with the concept of modernity, even if only as a question of periodization, one is dependent upon abstract theorization, and in practice this entails turning to interpretations offered by sociology.

³⁵ Reinhard, "The Idea of Early Modern History," 281.

The abstraction and universalization of the concept of modernity has been at the core of the social sciences since their inception in the 19th century. The realization that a great discontinuity had appeared in history was what inspired much of the work of the sociological field's three Grand Old Men, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, and the nature of this macrohistorical phenomenon has been analyzed and described by thousands of scholars for more than a century and a half. It is, perhaps then, paradoxical that at the same time, it could be argued that modernity is still a quite poorly understood phenomenon. It has even, famously, been defined out of existence by Bruno Latour, who in his 1991 book declared "*We have never been modern*".³⁶

However, apart from Latour and a few other radical critics³⁷, there is broad agreement that modernity constitutes a historical phenomenon sufficiently important to be worth dealing with in universal terms. Essentially, the emergence of modernity is perceived to have constituted a central discontinuity of history. It is widely understood that pre-modern societies and modern societies are characterized by completely different historical-sociological dynamics, concerning almost all aspects of society.³⁸

Yet, an attempt to identify the constitutive elements of modernity will quickly run into trouble. Basically, there is no general agreement over what constitutes modernity in analytical terms, but rather an overwhelming mess of different definitions, each suited to a specific field of inquiry where it provides a structural framework for historical differentiation: For Marxists, modernity is defined by the dominance of the capitalist mode of production, in contrast to earlier feudal societies. For Weberians, modernity is characterized by continuing rationalization at both the formal, theoretical and practical level. A number of cultural historians define it as a set of promissory notes, as an expectation for the future.³⁹ And the list could go on.

Conceptualizations of the phenomenon of modernity are thus extremely differentiated across the social sciences. In the construction of modernization theory from the 1950's and onwards, an attempt was made to reconcile these widely varying definitions by seeing the variation as a function of the complexity of the phenomenon itself – shifting to the view that

³⁶ Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*.

³⁷ E.g. Symes, "When We Talk about Modernity."

³⁸ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 3; Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies*.

³⁹ Wittrock, "Modernity: One, None or Many?," 55.

modernity should be understood as a totality of interacting phenomena, rather than characterized, or driven by, any individual component or development. In essence, modernization theory posits that there is a broad set of processes that we label modernization, which leads from a universalized “tradition” to a universalized “modernity”. According to this view, while traditional societies are differentiated from one another, they all share a certain set of characteristics which define them as traditional. Contrarily, due to the interconnected nature of modernity, modernized societies show a marked tendency to converge on a standard model, which, in general practice, is defined by contemporary Western Europe or the United States.⁴⁰ A newer variant of modernization theory is exemplified in the writings of Anthony Giddens, which have had a great influence on contemporary studies of modernity: “Modernity, I propose, is *multidimensional on the level of institutions*, and each of the elements specified by these various traditions plays some part”.⁴¹ The multidimensionality proposed by Giddens allows him to incorporate the different conceptualizations of modernity into a single phenomenon, without choosing between one single dynamic or another as the primary driving force.

However, the focus on modernity as an assemblage of diverse dynamics tends to produce a lack of analytical acuity as regards its historical emergence. For Giddens, the driving force of modernity becomes either very abstract phenomena, such as “the separation of time and space ... the disembedding of social systems ... and the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations”⁴² or simply the totality of history at the moments before the modern transition: ““Modernity” refers to modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards, and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence”.⁴³ Giddens’ work is therefore much more useful as a diagnosis of the complex modern condition than as an analysis of the emergence of modernity. But the multidimensional view of modernity remains very influential, as can be gauged by a glance at the Wikipedia page describing modernity: “Modernity is a term of art used in the humanities and social sciences to designate both a historical period (the modern era), as well as the ensemble of particular socio-cultural norms, attitudes and

⁴⁰ Wittrock, 32.

⁴¹ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 12 (Italics in the original).

⁴² Giddens, 16–7.

⁴³ Giddens, 1.

practices that arose in post-medieval Europe and have developed since, in various ways and at various times, around the world.”⁴⁴

In this mode of reasoning, then, the analytical conceptualization of modernity is highly dependent on the epochal conception of a European age of modernity, just as the epochal concept is dependent on analytic conceptualizations. Modernity is defined as ‘what happened in Europe in the modern age’, while the justification for labeling the period modern is itself dependent on the analytical concept of modernity. This reasoning is thus somewhat circular, which makes the concept of modernity lose much of its analytical value as a universal concept – in contrast to merely being a concept of local periodization, which is always tautological in this way. If the emergence of modernity is to be studied in an *analytically* meaningful way, with pretense to universal qualities, it cannot then be understood as broadly as suggested by Giddens.

Modernization theory and its discontents

The problem with broader interpretations of modernity is not only a theoretical one, but a practical problem as well. As modernization theory has been used to predict developmental patterns for third world countries, many assumptions have proven misguided – though perhaps not as completely as it is currently fashionable to declare.⁴⁵ The apparent failures of modernization theory have led to criticism from scholars in the postcolonial tradition, most forcefully by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe*.⁴⁶ As Chakrabarty among others make clear, analytical conceptualizations of modernity are deeply tied to the specific historical experience of Western Europe, where it is normally thought to have originated. As a consequence, the purportedly universal concept of modernity reflects European cultural idiosyncrasies - as modernity is a concept created to make sense of European history, it predictably fits non-European history quite crudely, and thus provides the basis for biased comparison, implicit or explicit.

As a response to this challenge, in recent years two distinct alternative theoretical frameworks have proven especially popular in the field of world history; the frameworks of ‘multiple modernities’, and what I label ‘global modernity’. However, I will argue that, despite their popularity, none of

⁴⁴ Wikipedia article for “Modernity”; see also Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*, 2.

⁴⁵ Marsh, “Modernization Theory, Then and Now.”

⁴⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

these conceptualizations solve the problem of globalizing our historical framework in a satisfactory way, and remain severely problematic.

Multiple modernities

The concept of multiple modernities, originally developed by Shmuel Eisenstadt, is a rather recent attempt at freeing the concept of modernity from its Euro-American moorings and thus to challenge the convergence theory of modernization. Its central point is that modernity, rather than just being copied or imported by non-European societies, is constantly being reinterpreted and developed anew, giving rise to a wide spectrum of different ways to be modern.⁴⁷ Even within Europe, it is claimed that distinct modernities have developed, with the communist states as a first example of a crystallization of an alternative modernity.⁴⁸ Similarly, Richard Wolin writes that in order to get away from our “extreme biases of Eurocentric conceptions of development ... we need to expand and pluralize our definition of modernity”.⁴⁹

Inspired by the idea of multiple modernities, it has become fashionable to speak of also early modernity in the plural.⁵⁰ According to the China scholar R. Bin Wong, for example, multiple modernities persist because they evolved from multiple early modernities, and China accordingly did have an early modern era – only it was different from the European one.⁵¹ Looking at the Moghul Empire, Ayesha Ramachandran writes: “The modern invention of the world, I want to suggest, took place in quite different places and in quite different ways, but the epistemological impulse behind this process may have been surprisingly similar across early modern cultures”.⁵²

While the multiple modernities paradigm may certainly be applauded for its critique of classical modernization theory, several weaknesses should be recognized. Firstly, as it does not develop an alternative view of “core” modernity, but instead enables very different phenomena also to be la-

⁴⁷ Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities.”

⁴⁸ Eisenstadt, 10.

⁴⁹ Wolin, “Modernity,” 744.

⁵⁰ See e.g. the two issues of *Daedalus*: “Early Modernities”; “Multiple Modernities”; See also Porter, *Comparative Early Modernities*.

⁵¹ Wong, “Did China’s Late Empire Have an Early Modern Era?” 213–4.

⁵² Ramachandran, “A War of Worlds: Becoming ‘Early Modern’ and the Challenge of Comparison,” 20; See also Islamoglu and Perdue, *Shared Histories of Modernity*.

beled modern, it becomes difficult to demarcate the boundaries of modernity. Positing a host of modernities begs the question of what makes all of them modern – to which question it provides no new insights. Following the conceptual scheme of multiple modernities thus makes us no wiser as to what constitutes modernity and how it transforms and operates in society.⁵³ It functions rather as a conceptual loosening of the one-size-fits-all modernization theory, making it possible to include other experiences without really changing the parameters – and is thus scientifically a dead end. As noted recently by Sebastian Conrad, the multiple modernities paradigm could perhaps more reasonably be interpreted as varying cultural manifestations of a single modernity.⁵⁴ The idea of multiple modernities has even been criticized from a postcolonial perspective for retaining the culturally specific European modernity as the yardstick by which to measure non-European deviations and alternatives, and thus perpetuating a certain conceptual eurocentrism.⁵⁵

Global Modernity

The framework which I label ‘global modernity’, as of yet largely undefined by its practitioners, has been steadily growing in popularity during the recent decades, and can be summarized as follows: the emergence of modernity cannot be ascribed to any given spatial location (i.e. Europe) as it was a product of precisely the interconnections and networks that were extended over the globe during the last five centuries. This perspective mirrors the older, now partially discredited, critiques of modernization theory, namely World-systems analysis and Dependency theory, which also claimed that the core of modernity lay in the relations among groups and societies rather than in the societies themselves.⁵⁶ But while these had a narrow economic focus, ‘global modernity’ is equally inspired by cultural history and therefore has a broader, although also more fuzzy and under-defined, focus. The framework of ‘global modernity’ can be found in a variety of works, but has attained its clearest programmatic formulation in Gurminder Bhambra’s *Rethinking Modernity*.⁵⁷ Inspired by Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s notion of *connected histories*⁵⁸, Bhambra suggests that we should imagine “co-eval, that is, co-evolving and co-existing modernities”, and

⁵³ Cf. Brimnes and Andersen, “Modernitetsbegrebets Muligheder,” 154–5.

⁵⁴ Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 60.

⁵⁵ Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*, 56–79.

⁵⁶ Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*.

⁵⁷ Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

⁵⁸ Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories.”

create “histories that would allow us to see that the theories and ideas we use were not created by a culture diffused from a centre which then impacted on the world, but through the interconnections of processes and paradigms that are themselves continually in negotiation and development”.⁵⁹ In this perspective, as modernity is global, so is its early form – in the words of Laura Hostetler, “the term “early modern” can appropriately be used to describe global, rather than uniquely Western, processes”.⁶⁰

While *connected histories* and the concomitant focus on global interconnections have certainly inspired positive developments, I would argue that this theoretical complex also leads us in unsatisfactory directions for a variety of reasons. Firstly, I believe this view overestimates the importance of global connections in the early modern world. While the world indeed saw an immense increase of long-distance trade and travel from around 1500 onwards, it must be remembered that it rose from a vanishingly small basis. Secondly, the stark denial of the European origins of modernity seems on its face implausible, and would certainly surprise many of the third world’s great modernizers, such as Sun Yat-Sen, Mustafa Kemal and Jawaharlal Nehru, who certainly saw modernity as something to be imported from the West. Thirdly, and most consequentially, to assert that modernity evolved as a global project, a “shared East/West undertaking”⁶¹, makes it a lot harder to explain historical divergence and difference. Hierarchy, power differences and cultural idiosyncrasies are continually underplayed by the advocates of a globally developed modernity, which makes European global dominance in the 19th century extremely hard to understand. I find myself strongly aligned with Chakrabarty in suspecting that these ideas of equal and shared histories have arisen primarily because of our egalitarian values – because we *want* history to be equal, rather than because it was.⁶²

Dismissals of modernity

A third, but less prominent, group of scholars critical of modernization theory take a more radical approach – regarding the notion of modernity as merely a moral judgment, they opt to discard the term altogether.⁶³ In

⁵⁹ Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*, 77–8.

⁶⁰ Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*, 2.

⁶¹ Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*, 98; cited from Jardine and Brotton, *Global Interests*.

⁶² Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity,” 672.

⁶³ E.g. Symes, “When We Talk about Modernity.”

a similar vein, other scholars argue that we should only treat modernity as a discursive object of study, refraining from its use as an analytical concept.⁶⁴ It is of course true that the establishment of qualitative difference that is enabled by the oppositional pair of modernity and tradition has often been used as a claim of superiority of one society to another, and that it is quite difficult to disentangle oneself from the inherent feeling that modernity is somehow “better” than tradition. However, I would argue that we cannot let go of our structuring concepts of history without losing the structure itself – In order to be able to understand the changes enacted by modernization we must be able to define it, and a somewhat morally burdened concept might even be better than no concept at all.⁶⁵

The deeper problem

The primary challenges to the old Eurocentric version of history thus suffer from concrete problems that make them unable to supplant it, or qualify it in a constructive fashion. However, I would claim that these issues are in fact only a product of a larger problematic – *that none of these models significantly challenge our overall conception of historical structure*. In fact, they seem only to be cosmetic modifications of a larger world historical framework which remains firmly in place – the pseudo-Hegelian teleology of modernity. In the following sections, I will expand on what constitutes this larger framework, and how it creates these problems for globalizing our interpretation of early modern history.

The Hegelian banana

World History, or history on the largest scales more generally, serves the function of constructing an overall framework for understanding the significance of events on more local levels of time and space. As significance is a value often determined by its relation to the future, it carries with it inherent dangers of teleology – the fact encapsulated by the philosopher Kierkegaard as “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards”. In a fairly recent article, Kenneth Pomeranz noted that current world history is characterized by the “framing narrative for world history as the origins of modernity”.⁶⁶ As we try to understand world history backwards, it takes the form of a genealogy of our modern condition. In order to be relevant enough to include, pre-modern developments must

⁶⁴ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*.

⁶⁵ This is also argued by Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22.

⁶⁶ Pomeranz, “Teleology, Discontinuity and World History,” 191.

somehow relate to the later emergence of modernity. Correctly seeing the modern transition as perhaps the most crucial moment in history for our present condition, world history has thus become ‘*modernocentric*’, to introduce a neologism I would like to see spread. And modern eurocentrism, the much maligned bogeyman of the last decades, is in fact mostly a by-product of this modernocentrism, rather than a product of ethnic or cultural myopia.

The modernocentric vision of history has traditionally resulted in what could be called a banana-shaped history.⁶⁷ It begins to unfold with the dawn of civilization in Mesopotamia, and slowly edges westwards to Greece, then Rome, and continues north into Europe until it finally reaches Britain and the Industrial Revolution. In newer works, a chapter on China or India is inserted to counter the critique of eurocentrism, but the main story remains the same.⁶⁸ Although often presented as moving forwards chronologically, it is really a backwards-looking genealogical structure. It is a pseudo-Hegelian story of the ‘spirit of modernity’ moving through the ages until it reaches perfection in our time. And while, as Pomeranz notes, this framework can certainly be justified in guaranteeing relevance to world history⁶⁹, it carries with it a host of problems for understanding the dynamics of historical change. These problems become worse the closer you get to the modern transition – and so especially critical for the early modern period.

The people without history

The most obvious problem arising from the modernocentric view is the large parts of history consigned to secondary status. Much more work has been done on ancient Persia than on its Safavid period, as the latter falls outside the cone of vision. And much of the world has traditionally been absent in history until contact with modernizing Europeans was established in quite late centuries.

In the last decades, scholars influenced by the postcolonial tradition have been trying to remedy this problem, by placing their focus on the subaltern or the “People Without History”.⁷⁰ Yet, remaining within the modernocentric framework, this has usually taken the form of assigning some

⁶⁷ I owe the notion of a banana-shaped history to conversations with Peter Fibiger Bang.

⁶⁸ E.g. Roberts, *A Short History of the World*.

⁶⁹ Pomeranz, “Teleology, Discontinuity and World History,” 191.

⁷⁰ Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*.

relevance for the emergence of modernity to the said people, in a move Lynn Struve has described as “We-too-ism”.⁷¹ This has been done in a variety of ways, of which the above mentioned multiple modernities and global modernity paradigms are central examples. The epithet of (early) modernity thus acts as a way of including non-Europeans in the larger history of the world.⁷² In Chinese history, the traditional temporal indicator “late imperial” is thus exchanged for “early modern” by an increasing number of scholars.⁷³ Regarding India, Sanjay Subrahmanyam expresses the sentiment clearly: “Having taken away so much from the societies of South Asia, it seems to be high time that social science at least gave them back what they had by the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries – their admittedly very ambiguous ‘early modernity’”.⁷⁴

The same process is also at work in the spread of early modernity further back in time.⁷⁵ The trouble arises in the attempt to construct a genealogy of modernity, to explain how, why and where it emerged. There is first the general problem of genealogy and periodization – that as you go back in time, there will always be an earlier directly related cause leading to your current position, so that the explanation extends indefinitely. Any discontinuity you introduce will therefore be to some degree arbitrary, and will thus require a well-defined argument. But with modernity defined so differently according to different scholars, almost any development, any point in time, could be argued to signify its beginnings. Therefore, the traditionally accepted starting point of early modernity, the year 1500, has come increasingly into doubt. Since modernity functions as a positive value judgment and criterion for relevance, almost every scholar wants his or her period defined as modern, which leads to (early) modernity being stretched far into the previously medieval period.⁷⁶ And, by going further and further back in time, the phenomena that purportedly characterize modernity become increasingly watered down, especially when there is no clear qualitative distinction between tradition and modernity. For example,

⁷¹ Struve, “Chimerical Early Modernity: The Case of ‘Conquest Generation’ Memoirs,” 31.

⁷² Clausen, “Early Modern China: A Preliminary Postmortem,” 4; Wigen, “Japanese Perspectives on the Time/Space of ‘Early Modernity,’” 2–3.

⁷³ For specific examples, see Clausen, “Early Modern China: A Preliminary Postmortem.”

⁷⁴ Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices,” 100.

⁷⁵ Strathern, “Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before.”

⁷⁶ E.g. Porter, *Comparative Early Modernities*, where it is defined as 1100-1800; Another example is Scott, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750*; cf. the discussion in Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*, 1:52–3.

as an extensive market economy or commercialization is normally regarded as a modern phenomenon, the growth of trade in 18th century Europe is a prototypical sign of early modernity. So too, perhaps, is the growth of the 16th century, but what about the commercial revolution of the 13th century? And should the Carolingian renaissance also be seen as showing signs of early modernity?

This example is representative of a typical path of interpretation: it begins with an observation of a phenomenon preceding European modernity, which is then labeled modern, or as a driving force of modernity. Subsequently, medieval scholars protest that the phenomenon in question has antecedents far back in time, which therefore shows that Europe was on a modernizing path from very early on. Lastly, phenomena like it are observed historically outside of Europe, leading to ideas like a globally emerging modernity. This path has been taken in quite a few areas, including studies of proto-industry⁷⁷, bureaucracy⁷⁸, warfare⁷⁹, and commercialization. It is, on the contrary, very rare that the epithet of modernity is taken away from a phenomenon or a society, as this would seem to deny the area relevance.

This kind of theorizing is of course quite problematic, and for several reasons. When the concept of early modernity becomes stretched over the globe, two things happen: the concept loses much of its original meaning, and any analytical connection between early and ‘full’ modernity becomes muddled. In the original European case, we expect early modernity to be characterized by dynamics leading to modernity, but this is not so easy in the rest of the world. As noted by Harriet Zurndorfer, if we stipulate a Chinese early modernity beginning by the Song era (ca. 960), China would have had a full 900 years of early modernity, which can only lead to disappointment over why it did not take the last step into modernity.⁸⁰ The East would still seem to have been stuck in history, just now in early modernity instead of tradition, until Europeans arrived. A further problem arises in that this claim of a shared, global early modernity seems to make later divergence even harder to explain. If the world was on a common path of

⁷⁷ Ogilvie and Cerman, *European Proto-Industrialization*, chap. 1; then Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

⁷⁸ From Weber to Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*; to Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*.

⁷⁹ Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560-1660*; then McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power*; and Parker, *The Military Revolution*; finally Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

⁸⁰ Zurndorfer, “China and ‘Modernity,’” 462–3.

“deep modernization”⁸¹, why do we see these immense differences in power and plenty developing by the end of the early modern period? Thirdly, the modernocentric vision is problematic in that it puts too large an emphasis, and value, on dynamics of change rather than stable systems, which causes us to miss important facets of history. For most of the world’s population, through most of its pre-modern history, change was not an especially prevalent factor of life, and so we should not expect societies, European or not, to show great signs of development everywhere we look. The stable nature of pre-modern societies can be fascinating enough on its own, and the history of these societies is important to tell even if no real influence on the modern world can be gauged.

By expanding our notion of (early) modernity, and thereby extending it beyond Europe, we thus act to legitimize the greater framework of world history as the ‘master plan of modernity’. And since this macrohistorical framework is created in order to give sense to specifically European history, we inevitably bind ourselves to Eurocentric conceptual schemes, even in our attempt to break away from them. As long as the overarching theme of world history is centered on the emergence of modernity, European history will remain privileged, as the concept itself is structured by the specific historical experience of Western Europe. If we really wish to construct a truly universal history, we will need to look beyond this constraining vision.

Occidentalism

A second set of problems with the newer paradigms of modernity lies in their failure to challenge some essentialist categories formed by the modernocentric version of history. The concept of modernity itself is, as we have already seen, one of these categories. But it is a great irony that, after spending decades deconstructing the essentialist conceptions of ‘Asia’ prevalent in earlier scholarship, the same essentialism often remains pervasive in world history regarding European development. It is an undervalued point that the Europe which constitutes the standard reference point for modernity is itself a construction formed by the modernocentric framing narrative. In the words of Chakrabarty, Europe “is an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some

⁸¹ Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*, 10.

everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity...”⁸²

The archetypal European experience of the early modern age is an idealized vision, fraught with inconsistencies and overgeneralizations which cover the fact that there was simply no singular direction in which the societies on the continent moved. This becomes a problem as national histories are struggling to live up to the ideals of the imaginary Europe, and thus become framed as stories of failure, such as the history of early modern Spain, or somehow uniquely different, as in the assertion of a German *Sonderweg*.⁸³ Failing to conform to the modernocentric teleology accordingly becomes something that needs special explanation. The same point has been made often regarding comparative studies of the East and West, where China scholars have for a long time implored us not to expect China to follow the ‘European’ developmental trajectory.⁸⁴ But the European trajectory is in itself a product of an essentialist understanding of Europe, followed by no real societies. Engaging with non-European historical experiences in a non-modernocentric fashion can thus also be used as a way of developing alternative conceptualizations of European history itself, as a way of overcoming the Occidentalism that is the inevitable counterpoint to Orientalism.

Towards a new framework

In this section, I aim to explore the contours of a viable conceptualization of the historical dynamics of pre-modern change outside the bounds of a modernocentric model. This is done in order to be able to reconceptualize early modern history into what I shall label ‘late pre-modernity’, and thus help freeing it from its teleological binds.

Stability and change in traditional societies

Compared to the modern world in which we live, pre-modern society seems exceptionally stagnant. In contrast to the rate of change experienced in modern society, where it can be justifiably expected that subsequent generations will lead a life quite different from our contemporaries, pre-modern life seems largely devoid of change - a pre-modern peasant had

⁸² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 3–4, italics in the original.

⁸³ See Blackbourn and Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* for a powerful critique of this.

⁸⁴ E.g. Cohen, *Discovering History in China*; Wong, *China Transformed*, 1997.

absolutely no reason to expect the life of his descendants to be anything other than the life he himself lived. Even so, when seen on a large time-scale, it is undeniable that development did occur. With the passing of centuries, pre-modern societies changed considerably, as is of course a precondition for the concept of history itself.

So, how do we integrate these notions of pre-modern historical change and stability? This has been a central goal of historical sociology, and for historical philosophy before that. The earliest theories depended on religious ideas of *providence*, the gently guiding hand of supernatural entities, which caused the world to change according to some divine principle. At least in the West, this idea depended on Christian conceptions of linear time, as opposed to earlier cyclical conceptions, which implied at least large-scale stability over time. Most influential of these providence-driven theories of change is that of Hegel, who founded the idea of the historical dialectic. For Hegel, historical change was clearly directional, and showed signs of order, and therefore, reason. The world was designed such that through the dialectic, the spirit came gradually to be conscious of its own freedom, and to realize it in the material world. Essentially, writing before Charles Darwin, Hegel made the creationist assumption that evidence of (semi-)orderly development must be the evidence of a reasoning agent or force, which he in a pan-theistic manner identified as “absolute spirit”.⁸⁵

With the continuing disenchantment of the world in the 19th century, providence became an unpopular explanation. A clear waypoint in the transition from providence-driven theories to theories of change based on blind processes is the Marxist conceptualization of historical change. In the traditional Marxist materialist conception of history, social development is driven by changes in the social relations of production. For Marx, history moved through a number of stages characterized by specific systems of material production, from primitive communism through slave- and feudal society to capitalism, which itself would give way to socialism. The factor ensuring change was the supposed internal contradictions inherent in each mode of production, which would lead to its own downfall. This was envisioned as a universal process, meaning that every society would tend to move through the same successive stages as material developments proceeded. Recognizing that this framework of development did not fit the histories of non-European societies, Marx posited a unique

⁸⁵ Fritzman, *Hegel*, chap. 7.

‘Asiatic mode of production’ to explain what he perceived to be the stagnant nature of oriental societies. Historical Materialism, as it became known as, thus remained a unidirectional and Eurocentric theory of development, but recognized semi-stable waypoints along the way in the form of stages.

After Darwin, more distinctly evolutionary theories of historical change proliferated. In the work of Herbert Spencer and other proponents of Social Darwinism, historical change was the product of intense competition between societies which led to a general increase in their complexity. Later evolutionary theorists such as Talcott Parsons similarly saw societies develop gradually by logics of competition and selection. Still, the evolutionary scheme of Parsons remained unidirectional. In Parsons’ historical framework, societies could either evolve in a single direction of “generalized adaptive capacity”, or would stagnate and fall apart.⁸⁶

In what is perhaps the most powerful theory of general historical change written in recent decades, *The Sources of Social Power*, Michael Mann takes issue with such gradualist, evolutionary theories in the development of stratified societies. In his treatment of the initial emergence of states, he argues that we cannot see a natural progression toward stratified societies, and that social organization in fact developed cyclically between ‘evolution’ and ‘devolution’, until very specific historical circumstances gave rise to a relatively rapid reorganization of social structure in specific localities.⁸⁷ The emergence of the state was, for Mann, “abnormal” and unwanted, a result of “unusual” social situations, and not an outgrowth of a general social trend.⁸⁸ In the rest of his work, Mann similarly denies that historical development followed an evolutionary pattern, as “Development cannot be explained in terms of the immanent tendencies of society.”⁸⁹ Instead, he insists that historical development has been accidental and uneven, only exhibiting directional patterns at the greatest level.⁹⁰

Two points of criticism need to be mentioned here. Firstly, when Mann turns his gaze toward the development of post-Roman society to study “the European dynamic” (and only that!), he seems to argue for exactly

⁸⁶ Toby, “Parson’s Theory of Social Evolution”; Haines, “Biology and Social Theory,” 33.

⁸⁷ Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, chap. 2.

⁸⁸ Mann, 39, 127.

⁸⁹ Mann, 538.

⁹⁰ Mann, chap. 16.

such a “development in terms of the immanent tendencies of society”, and his earlier criticism seems to fall away. In a classic example of the destructive effects of modernocentrism, for Mann the whole story of the last 1500 years becomes one of incipient modernity, and Europe, supposedly having “the leading edge of power”, becomes the only object of interest.⁹¹

Secondly, Mann’s criticism of the evolutionary framework appears to be mainly directed against its vulgar, teleological versions popular in his time. The misappropriation of evolutionary dynamics was, in fact, a general problem among both proponents and opponents of social evolutionism, who seem to have taken the wrong lessons from biological evolutionism already from Spencer onwards. The three most problematic assumptions can be listed as 1) the unidirectionality of development, 2) the progressive nature of development, and 3) the internally driven nature of development. These three assumptions are at the base of many theories of social evolution, but fit very badly with the analogy to biological evolution.

While generally seen as discredited, I believe that the analogy between biological and social evolution can really be useful in understanding historical change over larger time periods. But in order for it to be useful, we have to take a closer look at how the dynamics of biological evolution function. Here, we must take our inspiration from the Neo-Darwinian ‘Modern Synthesis’, which from the 1970’s onwards has been particularly associated with the work of E. O. Wilson, W. D. Hamilton, Robert Trivers, and brilliantly synthesized by Richard Dawkins.⁹²

Before going deeper into the analogy, we have to delimit where it seems useful and not. A number of scholars have explicitly incorporated Neo-Darwinism into theories of social change at a more fundamental, detailed level. A leading theorist here is W. G. Runciman, who in a number of articles and books has espoused his “Theory of Cultural and Social Selection”.⁹³ Runciman proceeds from the fundamental mechanisms of cultural and social selection to create an encompassing theory of social evolution to serve as a basis for comparative studies of historical development. But in spite of the great sophistication and merit of his theory, its detailed and

⁹¹ Mann, 538.

⁹² Wilson, *Sociobiology*; Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour”; Trivers, *Social Evolution*; Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*.

⁹³ Runciman, *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection*; Runciman, “Culture Does Evolve”; Runciman, “The Selectionist Paradigm and Its Implications for Sociology”; Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory*.

structured nature makes it hard to apply to historical phenomena, and in the end fails to produce any substantial new insights into the processes of historical change.⁹⁴ A different approach is put forward by Walter Scheidel, who in a chapter titled *Sex and Empire* uses Neo-Darwinian theory to argue for the importance of sexual competition and reproduction in the development of human societies.⁹⁵ This perspective, however, also falls somewhere between reductionism and banality as a framework for understanding historical change, even if it may provide an interesting side story.

The trouble with these approaches is that they become too concrete and mechanical, as they focus on fundamental mechanisms of selection and evolution. At the fundamental, short-term level, historical change is simply too complex, and too driven by reflective agents, to be usefully encapsulated in reductive theories of evolution. Where the analogy of biological evolution is useful is instead precisely as an *analogy* for providing a different perspective on large-scale historical development. On the larger scales of time, individual reflection and action becomes less important, and there is a larger place for functionalist theory to provide insight.

To begin with, biological evolution is a *historical*, and not a *teleological* process. However much we as humans like to see ourselves as the pinnacle of the evolutionary process, evolution does not have a goal. Instead, it is characterized by the continual reshaping of patterns given by earlier development. Secondly, it is radically multidirectional, with the continual forking of directional paths from any given point, dependent on the interaction of established patterns and changes in the environment, both natural, cultural and social, and with a large role played by historical accident. Thirdly, evolution displays no sense of progress, even in the sense of a general enhancement of ‘fitness’ of anyone. This is not to say that evolution does not produce any patterns at all. General trends can be observed, but only on larger timescales, and in the most general ways, such as a trend toward increased complexity. Furthermore, local trends often occur, as certain selective pressures remain stable over certain periods of time. Lastly, patterns occur in the form of ‘convergent evolution’. When evolutionary pressures are similar across multiple cases, they often result in similar developments, as practicable ways of responding to such pressures are limited.

⁹⁴ For a useful critique of his earlier work, see Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, chap. 7.

⁹⁵ Scheidel, “Sex and Empire”; But see, in the same volume, Haldon and Goldstone, “Ancient States, Empires, and Exploitation”, esp. p. 24-7.

One of the insights most important for the usefulness of the analogy is the central role of *stability* in evolution. As Dawkins writes, evolution is governed by the general law of “the survival of the stable”.⁹⁶ Rather than enhancing ‘fitness’, evolution generally produces ‘Evolutionary Stable Strategies’, organizational patterns of self-reproduction from which deviations are generally unstable in the given environment. The quasi-stable conditions developed by these strategies do not guarantee optimizations of fitness or any other characteristic, only the continuous reproduction of itself, until changes in the environment disturbs the pattern. Evolution therefore often proceeds in localized spurts between stable states, and is not smooth and continuous.

Returning to Mann, we can now see that his critique of evolutionism is really a critique only of *wrong* applications of the evolutionary framework. Mann’s own theory of the emergence of states actually displays clear analogies with biological evolution, and can be read as a truly evolutionary theory. The ‘cyclical development between evolution and devolution’ of prehistory forms a large-scale stable state. A specific historical accident, due to certain features of local environments, broke this state, and in a short time span resulted in new patterns of semi-stable organization in the form of stratified societies. From there, environmental changes in the form of an expanding sphere of civilization provided the spur for further development.

These insights by Mann are as mentioned not carried over to the study of post-Roman society, where his narrative becomes more teleological. However, I would argue that the evolutionary analogy is useful to understand development throughout pre-modernity. It is especially useful in providing a heuristic basis for understanding *late* pre-modernity, where the attractions of teleology are at their strongest. In this way, the period just before the modern breakthrough mirrors the period just before that first great discontinuity, the emergence of civilization as studied by Mann.

Late pre-modernity was, as the neologism suggests, governed by pre-modern dynamics. It is these dynamics that we in the subsequent chapters turn to investigate. By applying the evolutionary analogy, what should we expect of these dynamics? Firstly, we should embrace the inherent non-teleological nature of change. There is no reason to expect pre-modern soci-

⁹⁶ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 15.

eties to develop in a direction of modernity. Change is of course ubiquitous, but we cannot measure this change with the yardstick of later developments. Modernity is not a natural endpoint for social, political or economic development. Just as Mann argued for the emergence of states, modernity should also be seen as decidedly ‘abnormal’ and ‘unnatural’ - not an outgrowth of a general social trend, but a localized, fast-paced rupture of earlier dynamics.

Secondly, we can expect some large-scale developmental directionality, but there are no reasons to expect them to constitute any kind of progress – we should not necessarily expect people to grow richer, or states to grow stronger on a general level. Instead, we should expect development to move in the direction of stable organizational patterns – not because of any inherent teleological importance of stability, but simply because these by definition tend to reproduce themselves, and non-stable patterns do not. Almost by circular logic, natural end-points for development are stable states.

Thirdly, we can expect a great degree of convergent evolution of social formations. This is because the underlying problems of social organization seem to have been broadly similar across the human world. Furthermore, there seem to be relatively few ways of organizing stable societies in an agrarian world, so in practice very different societies tended to converge on a limited number of models. It is important to distinguish between this convergent evolution and stage theories of development. Unlike stage theories, convergent evolution does not require social development to follow any specific path, and it is therefore always ‘open’. Different social systems can converge on a semi-stable pattern from a multitude of directions, and can diverge again in different ways, dependent on internal and external differences. It is just that sufficiently similar situations tend to produce similar results.

Directionality and the late pre-modern world

No matter how non-teleological your frame of reference is, pre-modern history clearly developed in certain directional patterns. On the basis of the previous, how can we think about this directionality in the world historical processes of pre-modernity?

One clear trend mirroring biological evolution is the continual expansion of the area and scope of human activity. This expansion was not linear,

but interspersed by repeated spouts of contraction due to disease and various social breakdowns. However, on the larger scale it clearly constitutes a trend. From the earliest emergence of civilized society at various times and places around the world, the boundaries of civilization have continually expanded across the globe, drawing more and more people into the 'human web' of stratified society.⁹⁷ Simultaneously, the population densities within the boundaries of civilization have continued to rise, although characterized by severe ups and downs on both the medium and smaller time-scales. In short, the world was gradually filled up with more and more people, with an increasing proportion of these living in stratified societies. The pre-modern world was thus a world dominated by extensive growth.

Extensive growth, however, does not mean simply more of the same. Modes of organization that work to ensure relative stability in a sparsely populated territory, such as early medieval Europe, do not necessarily work in the same way in a heavily populated territory, such as Europe a millennium later. Social forms evolve with changes in the environment, and so they also can also be characterized by a degree of directionality. But this directionality cannot be thought of in terms of an increase in organizational 'power', as Mann does, or an increase in wealth, or in any other 'progressive' form. If centralization of power is what produces stability, this tends to happen. But if decentralization is what best preserves a system, that tends to happen. And if a stable economic system increases the immiseration of all, that will be the direction it is headed in. What produces change in pre-modern society is the continual 'search' for stability in an extensively expanding world.

The late pre-modern world did not constitute a natural climax or end-point for this evolutionary path, but merely another step on the way. If undisturbed by the intrusion of the modern world emanating from the British Isles, it would be easy to imagine the continuation of this evolutionary path, even if we cannot imagine precisely what such a world would look like. The modern world did, of course, intrude, closing forever the evolutionary paths of pre-modernity and replacing them with a different set of paths. This led to the misperception that, in fact, we were on the modern path all along. But if our pre-modern evolutionary paths ever led us 'closer' to something resembling modernity, it was purely by chance,

⁹⁷ McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*.

and nothing necessitated that subsequent development would lead in the same direction.

So it is that while the late pre-modern world was indeed characterized by processes resembling those that characterize the modern, such as commercialization and bureaucratization, these are not evidence of a world developing toward modernity. It could very well be that pre-modern commercialization was in fact an *obstacle* to modern commercialization, as has been argued for China.⁹⁸ The late pre-modern world had its own evolutionary dynamics, counterintuitive and still substantially obscure to us. In the following chapters, I will try to elucidate these dynamics as far as I can.

⁹⁸ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*.

Agrarian Economies

Enfin toutes les inventions que peut chercher l'industrie, tous les avantages que la nécessité peut faire valoir, toutes les ressources qu'inspire l'intérêt sont ici employées et mises à profit.

In conclusion, all the inventions that industry can discover, all the improvements that necessity brings to attention, all the resources that self-interest inspires, are here employed and used profitably.

- François Quesnay, *Le Despotisme de la Chine*, 1767

Perhaps the most important battleground in the interpretation of early modern history lies in the field of economic history. Whatever modernity is, it is characterized by, or perhaps even defined by, a certain economic system – either defined as capitalism, a market economy, or simply economic growth. This central place held by the economy in the definition of modernity makes economic history suffer immensely under the view of modernocentric history.

In the scholarship on the economic history of all our three cases—late pre-modern China, France, and the Habsburg Empire—we can observe the same type of reasoning leading down the same blind alleys of discussion. With the development of a modern economy being expected as normal, considerable energy has been expended on locating the supposed blockages or obstructions responsible for their failures; and in all three cases, revisionist historians have argued that a more optimistic approach shows that the areas in question did in fact take part in the construction of economic modernity. It will by now come as no surprise that I find both these positions fairly misleading. Nothing ‘blocked’ the economy of all three societies from developing according to modern expectations, because modern development was never in the cards to begin with. By pre-modern standards, the three economies developed along fairly normal lines, and indeed show many commonalities.

What I hope to accomplish with this chapter is to show how many of the theoretical problems surrounding early modern economic history can be reduced by breaking with the modernocentric vision, and constructing a traditional framework capable of integrating the various experiences of

our three cases. I base this framework on the work of Ester Boserup, especially as presented in her seminal essay *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, with inspiration from the work of Anthony Wrigley.⁹⁹

The perspectives of Wrigley and Boserup, which will be further elaborated below, leads me to focus primarily on agriculture, the main sector of economic activity during the pre-industrial era. This focus situates the chapter somewhat outside the contemporary tendency of global history, which tends to privilege long-distance networks and trade as their objects of study. However, it is my belief that the determining influence of long-distance interactions has been unduly overstated in global historical scholarship. Seen in an overall perspective, the global streams of cultural and economic exchange before the age of steam-driven transportation were really very narrow and sporadic, and thus not capable of driving development in any determining fashion. As Fernand Braudel remarked in what could be called the foundational document of Global History, his 1949 book *Le Méditerranée*, “The Mediterranean in the sixteenth century was overwhelmingly a world of peasants and of the tenant farmers and landowners; crops and harvests were the vital matters of this world and anything else was superstructure, the result of accumulation and of unnatural diversion toward the towns. Peasants and crops, in other words food supplies, and the size of the population silently determined the destiny of the age.”¹⁰⁰ Such continued to be the case throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and indeed perhaps to a greater degree than Braudel himself realized, as he in his later volumes *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th to 18th century* tended to lose this focus.¹⁰¹

What this chapter will also illuminate is the degree to which developments in manufacture and trade can be seen as relatively dependent on this basis of agriculture and population growth. On this relationship, I am strongly influenced by research on Chinese economic development in late imperial times, especially by Philip Huang and Kenneth Pomeranz, on which also more below.

The chapter begins by presenting the case of China’s economic development in the 17th and 18th centuries through the perspective of Ester Boserup. Arguing that the Chinese example may serve as a heuristic model

⁹⁹ Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*; Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change*.

¹⁰⁰ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1241; Cited from O’Brien, “European Economic Development,” 18.

¹⁰¹ See esp. Braudel, *The Perspective of the World*.

for understanding the dynamics of Advanced Organic Economies, I proceed to show how the economic developments of the contemporary France can better be understood through this perspective. After a short discussion of the additional example of the Habsburg Empire, I conclude by drawing up the insights gained by adopting this perspective, as well as potential shortcomings.

China: tales of blockages, tales of modernity

The economy of China has traditionally been seen as the prototypical example of stagnation and lack of development. As far back as the 18th century, Adam Smith noted that “China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in world”, but then added “It seems, however, to have been long stationary.”¹⁰² A century later, Karl Marx felt it necessary to categorize China as being based on an “Asiatic mode of production”, in order to explain the supposed non-development of the Chinese economy. To Marx, the non-existence of private property, the despotic rule of the emperors, and the communal structure of peasant villages blocked Asiatic societies from participating in the historical dialectic, which he considered the normal course of history.

The trope of a blocked Chinese economy continued into the 20th century. In the 1950’s Karl Wittfogel’s ‘hydraulic thesis’ gained ground, in which the nature of irrigated agriculture forced China into an ‘Oriental Despotism’, incapable of internal change.¹⁰³ Later, Eric Jones blamed China’s economic stagnation on insecure property rights, as well as environmental catastrophes, which supposedly inhibited the buildup of capital in China.¹⁰⁴ The more recent, best-selling books *The Human Web* and *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* by, respectively William & John McNeill and David Landes, mostly places the blame on conservative Confucian bureaucrats, who stifled innovation.¹⁰⁵

Medieval mania and Malthusian mechanisms

¹⁰² Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, bk. 1, ch. 8, 24.

¹⁰³ Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, *The European Miracle*.

¹⁰⁵ McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*; Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*.

Alongside this story of stagnation, China specialists have since the 1950's developed a more differentiated picture of Chinese economic history. A very important factor in shaping this development was Joseph Needham's massive *Science and Civilization in China*, a multi-volume project with the first installment published in 1954 and still going.¹⁰⁶ The broad goal of this project was to document the immense technological sophistication and innovative spirit of medieval China, especially the Song dynasty (960-1279). Though often prone to exaggeration, and not particularly critical, Needham has had great success in igniting fascination for the economic and technological achievements of medieval China, which is now broadly recognized as the most illustrious period in Chinese history. Mark Elvin, in his 1973 classic *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, described the period as characterized by a 'medieval economic revolution', with 'revolutionary' developments in agriculture, water transport, money and credit, market structure and urbanization, and science and technology.¹⁰⁷ Eric Jones, in an oft-quoted passage, goes as far as declaring that "China came within a hair's breadth of industrialising in the fourteenth century."¹⁰⁸ Even Peer Vries, who usually is very careful with these things, writes that "In all probability China reached its highest level of development and wealth – that is *before* the twentieth century – during the period of the Song dynasty".¹⁰⁹

The flipside of the fascination of medieval China is encapsulated in what has become known as the 'Needham puzzle' – if China was so advanced early on, why did it fall so far behind later? Trying to answer this puzzle, a different kind of stagnationist literature has emerged, with much more focus on the fact of economic change in China, in contrast to the earlier stories of permanent stasis. However, the goal has still been to show why China was economically stagnant – only now just from the 14th century onwards. Since Mark Elvin's groundbreaking work, the main explanation has been a broadly Malthusian one. In Elvin's words, China was caught in a "high-level equilibrium trap" – it had reached a level of economic development where all the easy pickings in terms of improvement had been realized, and given the lack of technological development, the ever expanding population made labor-saving innovation economically unattractive. China was thus caught in a trap of falling incomes and increasingly

¹⁰⁶ "Needham Research Institute - Science and Civilisation in China."

¹⁰⁷ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, *The European Miracle*, 160.

¹⁰⁹ Vries, *Escaping Poverty*, 40.

expensive resources, only to be broken by “the historic contribution of the modern West”.¹¹⁰

Another major work in this tradition is Philip Huang’s *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangtze Delta, 1350-1988* published in 1990. Zooming in on the familial structure of agricultural production in China’s highly developed Yangtze delta, Huang strongly reinforced the pessimistic interpretation of Chinese economic development, which he characterizes as ‘involuted’. According to Huang, high population growth resulted in ever decreasing sizes of the typical family farm; smaller farm sizes forced household members, especially woman and children, to engage in under-paid activities such as cotton spinning for the market in order to survive. This massive and growing reserve of cheap labor doomed any attempt at capital-intensive production, and led peasant families to work harder and harder for a diminishing output.¹¹¹

The Great Divergence

Elvin and Huang’s works are landmark achievements. In addition to abstaining from tired clichés about Confucian conservatism, insecure property or Oriental despotism, they reconciled the fact that late imperial China was a highly commercialized, technologically sophisticated society with its observed stagnation compared to Europe. However, it is in this contrast with ‘Europe’ that certain problems arise. As the European comparison is never made concrete in the works of Elvin and Huang, the real contrasting case remains the imagined Europe of the modernocentric narrative, which lacks any role for internal European differences. Moreover, the whole enterprise of explaining the lack of modern development arguably led the authors to exaggerate the stagnant nature of the Chinese economy, especially when compared to an idealized European path that no society can live up to.

This was an important part of the argument of Kenneth Pomeranz’ trail-blazing book *The Great Divergence*, which has been central in shaping east-west comparison since it was published in 2000. In it, Pomeranz argues that China even up until about 1800 was on a par with Europe in terms of life expectancy, consumption standards, the efficiency of markets, and even technological sophistication. Secondly, he argued that the Malthusian constraints, that is, the pressure on ecological resources, in even the most

¹¹⁰ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 298–316, citation on p. 315.

¹¹¹ Huang, *The Peasant Family*.

populated parts of China were *not worse* than in Western Europe, which also suffered from relative overpopulation. In order to explain the subsequent great divergence between the two areas, Pomeranz argued that it was the ‘ecological windfall’ provided by British coal and colonies which helped Britain escape from its Malthusian constraints, and enabled it to grow indefinitely.¹¹²

Pomeranz’ work was groundbreaking and controversial in that it looked past the separate scholarly traditions and tried to fit European and Chinese economic development on the same, broadly Malthusian developmental trend. Furthermore, it was pioneering insofar as it challenged the established pessimistic view of the Chinese economy by substituting precise comparative studies of China and Europe for the earlier broad generalizations. This has helped to constrain the following ‘Great Divergence debate’ by empirical studies, which have proved very fruitful to historical scholarship. Following Pomeranz, a myriad studies have appeared comparing the British and Chinese economies, and a tentative conclusion has emerged – although China was indeed not especially poor, the comparison with Britain shows *large* and more importantly, *growing*, differences in countless areas. Moreover, Pomeranz’ specific explanation of ‘coal & colonies’ seems not to have held up to scrutiny, as he himself has conceded.¹¹³

As I argued previously, however, a different conclusion you could draw from the debate is that Britain was indeed quite exceptional. In numerous studies, Britain has proved to stand far outside the European mainstream, both in terms of wealth, economic structure and in terms of developmental trends. As I will attempt to show here, when we remove Britain from the picture, some central tenets of Pomeranz’ thesis hold up remarkably well. When we compare the workings of the Chinese economy to those of France or the Habsburg Empire, we do indeed see a ‘world of surprising resemblances’, as expressed by Pomeranz. These resemblances are indicative of a number of shared mechanisms which ruled economic development in both regions.

Following the general argument of the thesis, this chapter seeks to develop a unified framework in which we can interpret late pre-modern economic history of both China and Europe, not by lifting China into European

¹¹² Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

¹¹³ Pomeranz, “Ten Years After”; For a good, balanced overview of the debate, see Vries, *Escaping Poverty*.

early modernity, but by sinking Europe into Eurasian pre-modernity. I argue then, that the Chinese historical experience can serve as a useful model for interpreting economic development on the European continent. This can enable scholarship on both European and Chinese economic history to avoid the unfortunate teleologies inherent in modernocentric history.

Basics

China, as everyone knows, is of continental size, and this fact has many implications for studies of its economy. For large size means large internal differences in every conceivable measure. These differences will inevitably be glossed over by country-wide averages, which are therefore not always of much use. As a result, many of the studies cited will be limited in extent to only certain parts of the country, and we must be careful with extrapolating local findings to the whole of China.

Following G. William Skinner, China can be thought of as separated into a number of macro-regions, each with an economic core and hinterland, each region being more integrated internally than they are with the rest of the country (see fig. 1).¹¹⁴ On a larger scale, we can separate China into three economic areas:

- 1) A highly developed eastern part, consisting of most of the macro-regions of North China, Lower Yangzi, the Southeast Coast and the eastern part of Lingnan. This area was home to around half the empire's population, with population densities well exceeding any found in Europe. The eastern area as a whole was reliant on large imports of grain, in exchange for manufactured goods.
- 2) A less developed part, consisting of the remaining parts of China proper, as well as Manchuria. Home to most of the remaining population of the empire, these areas were on the other end of the grain trade, exporting large amounts to the eastern provinces. Moreover, the largest parts of population growth and economic expansion during the Qing took part here.
- 3) An undeveloped, 'colonial' periphery, consisting of Mongolia to the north, Tibet to the west and Xinjiang/East Turkestan to the

¹¹⁴ Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, 211–49.

north-west. While important politically, they had almost no economic significance to the empire, as they were very sparsely populated.¹¹⁵

Following precedence, much of the discussion will center on the Yangzi Delta, the regional core of the Lower Yangzi region, and China's most developed area. With a population of about 25 million by 1776, it is roughly comparable to the continental European empires.¹¹⁶

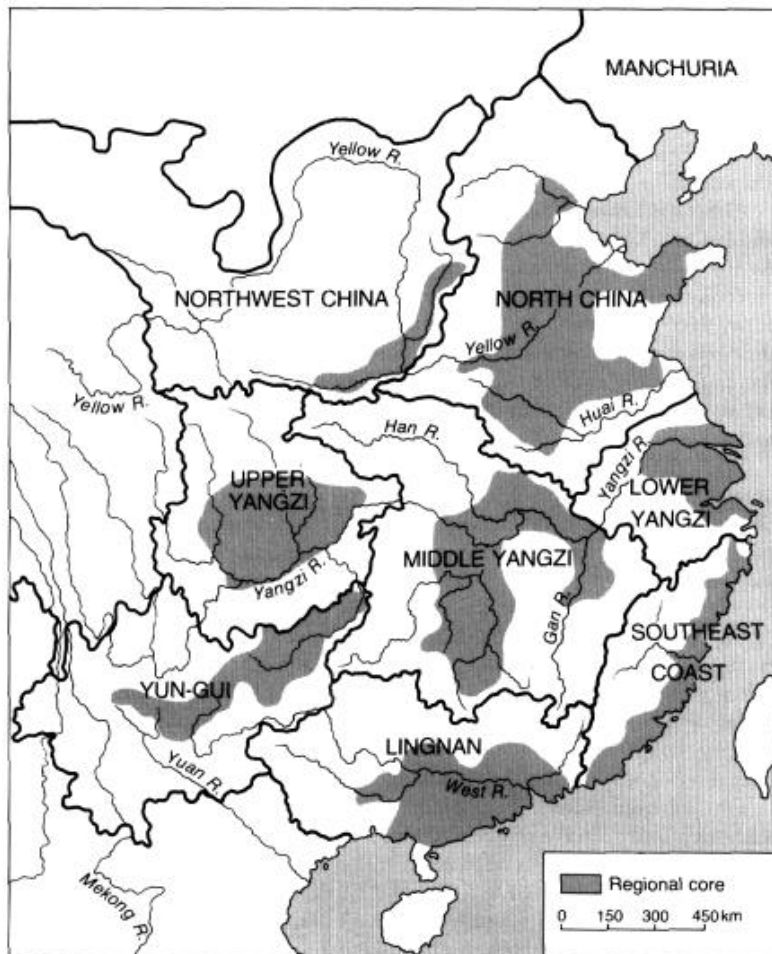


Fig. 1: Macro-regions of China.

Source: G. William Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*

During most of the 17th century, the Chinese economy was in crisis. A concurrence of bad environmental conditions, rebellion, and epidemics,

¹¹⁵ I draw this distinction from Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*; See also Myers and Wang, "Economic Developments."

¹¹⁶ Xu, van Leeuwen, and van Zanden, "Urbanization in China, Ca. 1100-1900," 5. For my use of the term of empire, see chapter 4.

all exacerbated by the chaos associated with the dynastic transition between the Ming and the Qing dynasties had resulted in a sharp fall in population of the empire and a general deflation of prices.¹¹⁷ But after the end of the fighting in 1683, when Qing forces captured Taiwan, China entered more than a century of relative stability and growth, which has been known to Chinese historians as ‘The Prosperous Age’.¹¹⁸

The prosperous age was characterized by two phenomena that will loom large in any discussion of late pre-modern China – population growth and commercialization. Both can be seen as a continuation of earlier trends that go back at least to Song times, but had suffered setbacks in the preceding crisis. In the prosperous age, both developments picked up speed.

Demographic developments

One of the most remarkable phenomena of late pre-modern China is the spectacular population growth that occurred between the late 17th and the early 19th centuries. Already densely populated relative to the rest of the world, China’s population more than doubled, from around 150 million by 1700 to 300-340 million people at the end of the century.¹¹⁹ The reasons for this steep growth are hard to pinpoint precisely, but certain guesses can be made. Firstly, after the completion of the Qing conquest, peace generally prevailed in China, with the only wars being fought in far-flung territories of the empire. Secondly, when we look at climactic data, the 18th century appears to have been characterized by a robust rise in temperatures, which would likely have had positive consequences for the agricultural population (see Fig. 2). Thirdly, the large, relatively efficient market for grain and the state-run granary system both helped alleviate local subsistence crises which would have led to a fall in mortality.¹²⁰ And fourthly, we cannot rule out some effects of the spread of new techniques such as inoculation and other health related practices.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 311–13.

¹¹⁸ Kuhn, *Soulstealers*, chap. 2.

¹¹⁹ Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 330; Myers and Wang, “Economic Developments,” 571. The precise extent of population growth is still open to debate, especially as it is difficult to distinguish between shifts in state recording practices and shifts in real population figures.

¹²⁰ Will and Wong, *Nourish the People*.

¹²¹ Lee and Wang, *One Quarter of Humanity*; Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China*.

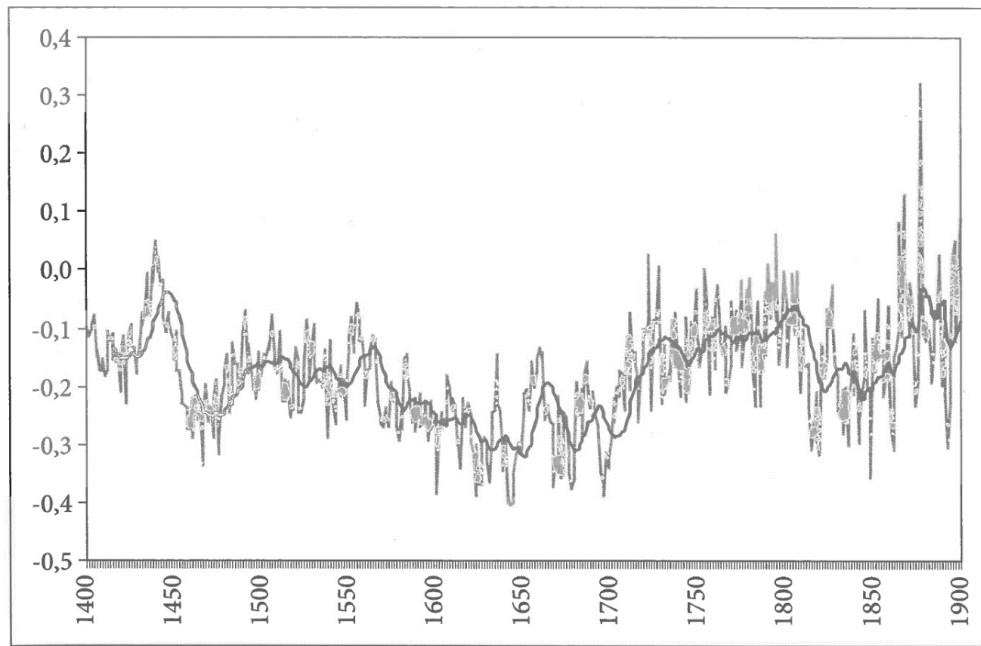


Fig. 2: Temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere, 1400-1900

Source: Paolo Malanima, Pre-modern European Economy, 83

The distribution of this population growth can be roughly characterized as following a ‘filling up’ pattern. While all parts of the empire saw population growth, it was far stronger in rural, underdeveloped areas than in already densely populated regions, both on the province-level and the local level, likely as a result of population migration.¹²² In the already intensely cultivated eastern provinces, mountainsides were terraced, wetlands reclaimed and large numbers of migrants left for less populated western provinces or overseas in search of land or livelihood. This pattern was reinforced by imperial support, as land obtained from clearances of previously uncultivated areas achieved tax-exempt status.¹²³

In older scholarly works, China was thought to be governed by crude Malthusian population mechanisms – population growth was restricted only by so-called positive checks, such as famine, disease and war. The combination of high female fertility with these positive checks supposedly kept the Chinese population on the brink of survival, hindering any economic development. In the words of Eric Jones, “copulation was preferred above commodities”.¹²⁴ Newer research shows that this was not the case – in

¹²² Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 331.

¹²³ Myers and Wang, “Economic Developments,” 567; Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt*, chap. 9.

¹²⁴ Jones, *The European Miracle*, 15.

China, as presumably anywhere else, population growth was not only restricted by positive checks, but also by preventive checks limiting fertility, although the nature of these checks certainly differed from European ones. In particular, female infanticide played a large role in managing family size.¹²⁵

As any other pre-modern economy, China was an overwhelmingly agrarian society, with a large majority of its population residing in the countryside. For China as a whole, the proportion of inhabitants living in cities of 10,000 residents or more hovered around 4%, showing perhaps a slight tendency to fall during the period. This is quite a low number, even in a pre-modern context, but it conceals important regional differences - for the Yangzi Delta, the number rises as high as 15%, although it was perhaps also here declining slightly over time. Other areas show varying rates, generally falling from east to west. When including inhabitants in cities with between 2,000 and 10,000 residents, we can observe a somewhat larger countrywide decline, perhaps from 11% to 7%, although the numbers are very uncertain.¹²⁶ Again we see a large regional variation, with the Yangzi Delta hovering steadily around 20%. The regional data suggests that the reason for the decline in urbanization could be the result of regional variations in population growth. As most of the 'new' population was born in, or migrated to, largely rural areas, the overall urbanization rates fell over time.

Agrarian structure

By the mid-Qing period, the Chinese countryside was mostly populated by independent, small-scale peasant cultivators. This had not always been the case. Rather, it was the culmination of a longer development reaching back to Song times which saw the gradual break up of an earlier manorial structure of agricultural production characterized by the use of various types of bonded labor. Even by the end of the 16th century, large manors cultivated by people of serf-like status were far from uncommon across the Chinese landscape. Many of these, however, had disappeared by the time of the Manchu conquest, and most of the rest were either destroyed

¹²⁵ Lee and Wang, *One Quarter of Humanity*; Lavelly and Wong, "Revising the Malthusian Narrative."

¹²⁶ Xu, van Leeuwen, and van Zanden, "Urbanization in China, Ca. 1100-1900"; Rozman, *Urban Networks*.

during the conquest or else disbanded in the following years.¹²⁷ By the time of the Yongzheng emperor (1723-35), this development was legally backed up by the granting of formal equality to many groups previously considered of servile status, chiefly in the agricultural sector.¹²⁸

The resulting agricultural structure shows some regional variation. Generally, in the regions with the highest agricultural productivity, the Lower Yangzi, the southeast coast and eastern Lingnan, most land was farmed by long-term tenants, renting land from absentee landlords residing in urban locations.¹²⁹ Elsewhere, a significant part of the land was owned by small-scale owner-cultivators themselves. Some managerial agriculture could also be found, especially in the North China region, a fact which in China has been hailed as evidence of ‘incipient capitalism’.¹³⁰ But these types of manager-landlords were few in number, and seem not to show evidence of any greater productivity or better cultivation techniques than small-scale farmers, so they seem unlikely to merit that description.¹³¹

Concomitant with the development toward small-scale independent farming was the gradually decreasing size of the average farm, from around 3.4 acres in 1650 to around 2.5 acres by 1850. In the densely populated Yangzi Delta, the 18th century saw an even more marked decline from roughly 1.875 To 1.16 acres.¹³² This is extremely low by global standards – in Europe, a 10 acre farm was considered small - and is indicative of the exceedingly intensive farming practices of the Lower Yangzi region, and China in general.

The intensive nature of Chinese agriculture was made possible by the special character of rice farming, rice being the dominant food crop in southern China. The yield ratio of rice, i.e. the relationship between grains sown and grain harvested, was in late imperial times around 10 times that for wheat – around 50:1 relative to 5:1.¹³³ All else being equal, much less land was then needed to grow the same amount of food when farming rice. Conversely, much more labor is also required in rice farming than with wheat. So effectively, rice farming can sustain a much denser population

¹²⁷ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, chap. 15; Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 324–28.

¹²⁸ Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 97–9.

¹²⁹ Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 325–7.

¹³⁰ Jing and Luo, *Landlord and Labor*.

¹³¹ Huang, *The Peasant Economy*, 139–45; Huang, *The Peasant Family*, 67.

¹³² Brenner and Isett, “England’s Divergence from China’s Yangzi Delta,” 620.

¹³³ Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 208.

than most other food crops, which partly explains the extremely small sizes of Yangzi Delta farms compared to European ones.

Commercialization

Another prominent characteristic of the Chinese economy was the large degree of commercialization of every part of society. From the end of the Ming and continuing through the 17th and 18th centuries, China underwent what some have called its second commercial revolution, building on the already extant commercial developments under the Song.¹³⁴

One important aspect of this is the spectacular growth of rural markets. Following the growth in population, an increasingly dense network of rural markets was established throughout the empire. These provide clear evidence that the image of a traditional rural economy untouched by market relations fits very badly with Chinese realities. Peasant life in China was simply intensely commercialized, with the rural markets performing a number of useful or even necessary functions, such as providing credit, channeling grain in and out of the villages depending on need, and serving as a place for social gathering. In a groundbreaking article, G. William Skinner even argued that the ‘standard marketing community’, composed of a rural market and its surrounding villages, should be seen as the fundamental social unit in rural China, rather than the village as traditionally thought.¹³⁵ As such, the rural markets served as local nodes of a commercial network integrating most of the empire into a relatively coherent whole.

We must not, however, get carried away by visions of a modern, frictionless market economy. While the links integrating the various market communities were certainly there, outside of the major thoroughfares they were generally quite tenuous, often consisting of small-scale itinerant merchants traveling from market to market. Furthermore, the physical infrastructure between markets was weakly developed, the roads often being muddy and in bad shape.¹³⁶ This lack of significant infrastructure developments led Skinner himself to describe the proliferation of markets as “false modernization”.¹³⁷ This, however, is a prime example of the power

¹³⁴ e.g. Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants*, 25.

¹³⁵ Skinner, *Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China*.

¹³⁶ Li, *Fighting Famine in North China*, 207–13.

¹³⁷ Skinner, *Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China*, 216.

of modernocentric preconceptions – as Skinner shared the modernocentric expectation that commercialization would naturally come with all other aspects of historical modernity, he apparently felt the need to invent a new category of failure to characterize the ‘divergent’ development of China. Conversely, bad infrastructure and friction in the outlying parts of a market system is exactly what is to be expected for a pre-modern economy, of course, and should not be taken as evidence against the *relatively* large degree of commercialization of Chinese rural society.

Along the major waterways of the empire, principally the Yangzi, Yellow and Pearl Rivers as well as the Grand Canal, long-distance trade reached enormous proportions, and the degree of market integration was often higher between major urban centers than between these centers and their hinterlands.¹³⁸ Large amounts of grain flowed down the rivers to feed the populations of the most heavily populated areas, in exchange for manufactured goods. According to one estimate, by the 18th century, 6.2 billion liters of grain entered the long-distance trade annually, enough to feed around 30 million people.¹³⁹ In the Yangzi Delta, a fifth of the population was fed on imported grain.¹⁴⁰

The large flows of grain into the densely populated, eastern areas, together with the high productivity of local agriculture, enabled an increasing shift to the cultivation of cash crops by local producers. In the relatively developed province of Guangdong, by the 18th century more than half of all arable land was covered in cash crops such as tobacco, tea, cotton, mulberry trees (the leaves of which was used in silk worm rearing), and sugarcane.¹⁴¹ In the Yangzi Delta, cotton cultivation took over a large and growing part of the land, to be used in the local cloth production.¹⁴² Cloth production itself, always the dominant manufactured good, was largely a peasant occupation as well. Primarily in the Yangzi Delta, but increasingly also in other parts of the country, a large rural industry grew up around cotton spinning and weaving. Cloth production here became an integrated part of the peasant family economy, with the households’ women and children providing the labor, and leaving the men to take care of the fields.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Li, *Fighting Famine in North China*, 197.

¹³⁹ Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 331.

¹⁴⁰ Xu and Wu, *Chinese Capitalism, 1522-1840*, 274–5.

¹⁴¹ Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt*, 184.

¹⁴² Huang, *The Peasant Family*.

¹⁴³ Huang, 51–2.

Hence, a large and increasing part of the Chinese population was in some way dependent on the market. Grain, manufactures, and everyday luxuries such as sugar or tea were heavily exchanged throughout the empire, enabled by the relative freedom of trade enjoyed by Chinese merchants. Land itself was also commercially traded, and shifted hands relatively often. Huge imports of silver, used as the preferred monetary medium for large-scale trade, as well as for paying taxes, aided this commercial development.¹⁴⁴ As the silver was often traded for Chinese manufactured goods, such as textiles and porcelain, this hastily growing foreign trade provided a further stimulus to production in the relevant regions—though of lesser importance in contrast with the in absolute terms vast domestic trade.

Pessimism and optimism

Although these basic patterns of demographic expansion and commercialization are largely uncontroversial, the theoretical interpretations of these developments have been subject to much debate. Roughly, the current views can be separated into a pessimist camp and an optimist camp depending on their overall assessments of the economic situation.

In pessimist interpretations, the Chinese economy is seen as grating against the Malthusian ceiling of overpopulation. The large population growth of the period is therefore seen as a huge problem, driving the economy into a cul-de-sac. According to Elvin, the Chinese economy experienced “quantitative growth, qualitative standstill”, as all economically possible improvements in productive technology had already taken place. The Chinese economy was simply stretched as much as it could be, with the only temporary reliefs coming from epidemic disease, which reduced the population pressure markedly.¹⁴⁵ This view of standstill is also reflected in Angus Maddison’s publications on Chinese economic performance. Measured in terms of GDP per capita (on which more discussion below), Maddison sets China at an unmovable and low 600\$ throughout the period 1300-1850.¹⁴⁶

Although clearly based on the same Malthusian vision as Elvin’s, Philip Huang provides a more dynamic, if even more dismal, picture of Chinese economic development. According to Huang, the decline in average farm

¹⁴⁴ Flynn and Giráldez, *China and the Birth of Globalization in the 16th Century*.

¹⁴⁵ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, chap. 17.

¹⁴⁶ Maddison, *Chinese Economic Performance*; For a critique, see Deng and O’Brien, “Creative Destruction.”

size led to a general intensification of agriculture, where increasing hours of work were required to produce the same output. The shift to cash crops should, according to Huang, be understood in the same manner: while cash crops were often more profitable to grow on a per-acre-basis than grain, the amount of extra work needed was often far larger than the economic gain, leading to lower overall labor productivity. Rather than being a positive development then, cash crops were a way of coping with the increasingly tiny plots of land allotted to each family.

Even the spread of rural manufacture can be seen as part of this process, Huang argues. With declining farm sizes, even when using intensive farming methods, there was simply not enough work to occupy both adult members of the household, as had been the case in earlier times. Pressed out of agricultural work, it became necessary for peasant women to find alternative employment in handicraft production for the market. But while activities such as silk worm rearing, cotton spinning, and weaving made it possible for a family to survive on very little land, it was ultimately less profitable per hour of work than farming, further contributing to falling labor productivity. Moreover, as more and more peasant families engaged in handicraft production, prices, and thereby profits for the individual producer, decreased further over time. As long as population continued to grow, peasants were thus trapped in a downward spiral of longer work hours, falling productivity and ultimately declining GDP per capita. These are the central features of the developmental pattern which Huang terms ‘involution’.¹⁴⁷

Other, more optimistic interpretations of the Chinese economy instead focus on the gains arising from increased trade and market access enjoyed by peasants. In the work of Li Bozhong, the Yangzi Delta is depicted as undergoing a successful intensification. The developed trade networks enabled a degree of regional specialization to emerge: the Yangzi Delta peasants imported large quantities of both fertilizer and grain, facilitating a shift to intensive, but quite profitable, cultivation of cash crops. Moreover, the peasants rationalized their cultivation practices and their use of scarce resources. The increased investment in the land in the form of fertilizer, as well as the improved agricultural techniques, both contributed to raising land and labor productivity in spite of the decreasing farm sizes.¹⁴⁸ A num-

¹⁴⁷ Huang, *The Peasant Family*; Huang, “Development or Involution.”

¹⁴⁸ Li, *Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850*.

ber of scholars have arrived at the conclusion that this successful intensification can be characterized as an “East Asian Miracle”, or a specific East Asian developmental path toward economic modernity, reliant on labor intensification but no less modern or effective than the ‘European’ path.¹⁴⁹

Looking away from farming practices and the question of labor productivity, another optimist view can be found when looking at popular consumption of manufactures and ‘everyday luxuries’, as Kenneth Pomeranz have done. Marketed consumer goods such as sugar, tea, and tobacco seem to have been consumed in fairly large quantities, at least comparable to consumption in contemporary Europe. There were of course large variations across the span of the empire, but certainly the developed parts of China consumed their fair share of these products, providing evidence that they were at least enjoying some fruits of the developed market economy.¹⁵⁰ Consumption of manufactures such as cotton was also comparatively high among the peasantry – as expressed by Huang, “In 1350, no one in China wore cotton cloth; by 1850, almost every peasant did.”¹⁵¹ The same is also true regarding other manufactures, such as books, furniture etc.¹⁵²

Still other optimist accounts stress the commercial diversification and institutional innovation associated with commercialization. William Rowe follows the Chinese ‘Sprouts of capitalism’-literature in documenting the spread of “capitalist enterprise” in mining and farming operations as well as workshop production.¹⁵³ Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski similarly write about innovation in the banking sector and in the field of customary law.¹⁵⁴

The complexity of pre-modern economic development

While both optimist and pessimist interpretations capture important aspects of the Chinese experience, they risk misleading scholars into seeing

¹⁴⁹ Sugihara, “The European Miracle and the East Asian Miracle”; Sugihara and Wong, “Industrious Revolutions in Early Modern World History”; Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, 32–9 and passim.

¹⁵⁰ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, chap. 3.

¹⁵¹ Huang, *The Peasant Family*, 44.

¹⁵² Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy*; Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, chap. 3.

¹⁵³ Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 125–7.

¹⁵⁴ Naquin and Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, 97–106.

this experience as either good or bad, as either ‘development’ or ‘involution’.¹⁵⁵ This problem arises from the application of modern standards of development to a thoroughly pre-modern context. Rather than seeing China as being caught in a trap, or suggesting that China was on its own path to the common goal of modernity, we should recognize that Chinese developments instead represented a typical case of pre-modern economic development.

In our modernocentric world, economic historians are used to work with only one scale of ‘economic development’—that represented by GDP per capita. In this framework, the higher the GDP per capita in an economy, the more developed it is. Scholars therefore highly value *intensive growth*, i.e. growth in GDP per capita, and in contrast don’t value *extensive growth*, i.e. growth of total output (mostly by way of population growth). This can be problematic in the study of pre-modern societies, as extensive growth was by far the most important phenomenon of the two. The problem is clearly illustrated by figure 3—Focusing only on GDP per capita quickly leads us to the absurd conclusion that nothing changed in Europe between 1300 and 1800. If we seek to understand pre-modern societies on their own terms, we cannot let modern expectations of intensive growth be the yardstick for economic development.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Huang, “Development or Involution”; See also Pomeranz, “Beyond the East-West Binary.”

¹⁵⁶ cf. Bang, “Beyond Capitalism”; Bang, *The Roman Bazaar*, 123–7.

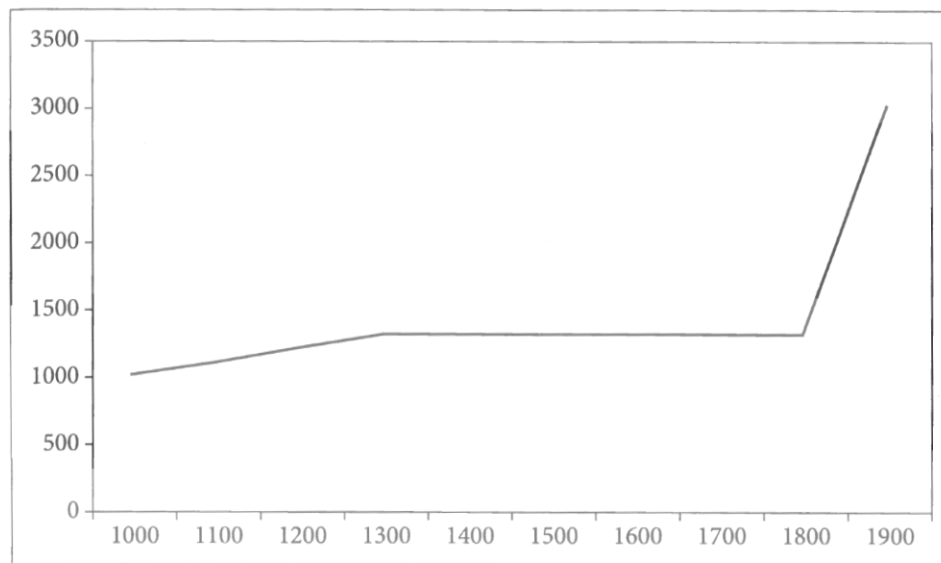


Fig. 3: Per Capita GDP in Europe, 1000-1900 (int. 1990\$ PPP)

Source: Paolo Malanima, *Pre-modern European Economy*, 287

The work of Anthony Wrigley shows why this is the case. Based on a reading of the classical economists, in his 1988 book *Continuity, Chance and Change* Wrigley distinguished between two kinds of economic systems – that of the “Advanced Organic Economy” described by these economists and that of the “Mineral-based Energy Economy” of the later industrial age.¹⁵⁷ In the pre-industrial world, before the widespread adoption of fossil fuels as a source of energy, the economy was ‘organic’ in that it was ultimately based on energy sources derived from agriculture. According to Wrigley, the dependence on organic sources of energy placed a number of limitations to what could be achieved in terms of growth in an economy. These limitations made the dynamics governing economic development radically different from those governing ‘mineral-based’ economies, which could rely on the immense energies of “the subterranean forest” of coal deposits.¹⁵⁸ The economic world of the 17th and 18th centuries therefore cannot be understood in the same terms as the economies of the industrial age.

Instead, I argue that the Chinese economic experience, in all its complexity, is best understood through the prism of Ester Boserup’s theories of pre-modern agricultural growth.¹⁵⁹ Boserup’s work focuses on population

¹⁵⁷ Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change*.

¹⁵⁸ Sieferle, *The Subterranean Forest*.

¹⁵⁹ Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*; Boserup, *Population and Technological Change*.

growth as the main driving force of economic development in pre-industrial times. Contrary to strictly Malthusian views, in which agricultural technology together with the inherent quality of the land determine the possible maximum size of the population, according to Boserup agricultural practices represents a response to local population densities. The historical trend toward intensification of agriculture, from primitive slash-and-burn practices to advanced multi-cropping regimes, should be seen as the result of peasants trying to cope with progressive overpopulation. As population grows in a given territory, the amount of land per person in agriculture declines. To achieve the same output per person as before, peasants have to work harder in their fields, e.g. weeding more closely or ploughing the fields an extra time. Even if new land is brought under the plough, it tends to be of inferior quality to the land already cultivated, and therefore also requires extra labor to produce the same amount of food. Faced with this problem, peasants often respond by shifting their practices to more intensive types of agriculture, such as introducing irrigation or sowing an extra crop per year. These technological ‘advances’ mitigate the problems of falling labor productivity, but only partially—generally, the trend toward harder work for the same output continues, but at a slower rate that it would if less intensive types of cultivation had been retained.¹⁶⁰

Nevertheless, as Boserup also recognized, a number of dynamics tend to lighten this otherwise quite dismal picture.¹⁶¹ First and foremost, population growth can give rise to ‘Smithian dynamics’—the productivity gains connected with the division of labor and the resulting labor specialization. When population density increases, the opportunities for labor specialization and trade expand, as relative transportation costs fall.¹⁶² The incentives for the building of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and markets similarly increase as population becomes denser. We will thus expect an increasingly diverse and sophisticated commercial sector to develop with a growing population. Additionally, knowledge will spread more easily through the population, which helps peasants conform to best practices of agricultural production.

¹⁶⁰ Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, 15–75.

¹⁶¹ Boserup, 75–6.

¹⁶² The importance of pop. density to markets is also noted in Bateman, *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, 130–2.

Following Boserup, we can see how population growth in pre-modern societies involves a complex interplay of dynamics, going in different, sometimes opposite, directions, which can hardly be characterized as either success or failure. The development of labor productivity in agriculture, for example, is a product of the balance between the ‘involutionary dynamics’ of agricultural intensification, which lowers productivity, and the ‘Smithian dynamics’ of the division of labor, which increases productivity. Which dynamic tends to dominate at any given time is an empirical question, but both dynamics will certainly be present.

The complexity of Boserupian growth also carries profound implications for questions of pre-modern living standards, which has been a central part of the Great Divergence debate. Given the opposing dynamics, in a situation of population growth we can expect food prices to rise relatively to all other prices, apart perhaps from the price of land. Conversely, we can also expect prices of manufactures and luxury products to fall relatively. Consequently, peasants and wage workers will have to work harder to survive, but will increasingly be able to afford what was earlier considered rare luxuries, such as tobacco and cotton cloth. Hence, we can see how discussing living standards in opposite terms of either improvement or deterioration flattens the picture into an unhelpful one-dimensional framework, and lead us to miss important complexities of pre-modern development.

A Boserupian view of China

By applying a Boserupian perspective on the economic history of late pre-modern China, I believe that we can resolve much of the tension between the optimist and pessimist camps of scholarship, and begin to perceive the complex workings of pre-modern economic dynamics.

Continuity, efflorescences, and revolutions

The Boserupian perspective has a clear implication of continuity, and this should lead us to question the relevance of identifying a second commercial revolution in China. This is also suggested by the observation that the more revolutions you identify the less revolutionary each of them becomes. Although there are disagreements about the extent of each revolutionary period, taking the more extensive, but by no means obscure, definitions results in the absurd conclusion that China’s economy underwent revolutionary change most of the time after 700. The first medieval economic

revolution as described by Mark Elvin already covers more than 500 years, from sometime in the 8th to the 14th century, and thus hardly merits the term “revolution”.¹⁶³ After a brief interlude of two centuries, we now have a second revolution, covering roughly from the middle of the 16th to the end of the 18th century.¹⁶⁴ Remaining are two short non-revolutionary periods, one between 1350 and 1550, and one after 1800.

It has even been suggested that the negative picture of the first non-revolutionary period between 1350 and 1550 is somewhat overstated. In a now more than a decade old anthology, a number of prominent scholars argue that the Song-Yuan-Ming-transition period (1100-1500) was characterized by far more continuity than was previously assumed.¹⁶⁵ For example, in the Yangzi delta Li Bozhong suggests that agricultural development continued in a slow tempo, binding the developments of the first and the second revolutions neatly together.¹⁶⁶

In a now prominent article, Jack Goldstone attempted to somewhat normalize these revolutionary periods by interpreting them as instances of the regular pre-modern phenomena he called “efflorescences”, defined as “a relatively sharp, often unexpected upturn in significant demographic and economic indices, usually accompanied by political expansion and institution building and cultural synthesis and consolidation”.¹⁶⁷ This way Goldstone attempted to find a common conceptual framework in which one could understand the ups and downs of Chinese and European economic development. As commendable as that is, Goldstone’s concept of efflorescences remains somewhat problematic as it reproduces the view of economic history as governed by revolutionary periods of change. In a Chinese context, “efflorescence” simply acts as a synonym for “economic revolution”, and so tend to be a near-constant phenomenon. Dividing economic history into periodic cycles of efflorescence and crisis remains problematic as it fails to capture the essential continuity of economic development in China, and as we shall see, Europe as well.

With the revolutionary periods extending so far as to become normal, we should perhaps instead refrain from thinking Chinese economic history in terms of revolutions altogether. The historical background for the claims

¹⁶³ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*.

¹⁶⁴ Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 122–3.

¹⁶⁵ Smith and Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*.

¹⁶⁶ Li, “Was There a ‘Fourteenth-Century Turning Point?’”

¹⁶⁷ Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth,” 333.

of Chinese economic revolutions was the now outdated view that the norm in China was stagnation. The evidence suggests that we should invert our conceptions of normalcy and exception, and see things in a different perspective – that of *long periods of slow, steady expansion interrupted by shorter periods of crisis*.

A number of points are important to note here: First, *expansion* does not mean a steady improvement, or growth in GDP per capita. Neither does it refer to *only* extensive growth, i.e. “quantitative growth, qualitative standstill”. It simply means a continuation of Boserupian growth patterns – demographic growth, agrarian intensification, commercialization, diversification and so on. GDP per capita is basically a red herring in a pre-industrial setting, as it tells us very little about the actual level of economic development. Second, we should not expect the periodic crises erupting from time to time to be endemic to the economic system, or caused by transitions between economic systems, as in the Marxist interpretation of economic change. Rather, periods of crisis should be seen as occasioned by more contingent factors, such as climate change, disease, or political problems. Third, as Boserup also mentions¹⁶⁸, continuous economic expansion may at times be subject to threshold effects. Therefore, shifting trends in agricultural productivity are to be expected, depending on whether Smithian or involutionary dynamics are strongest at the time. The general trends are thus subject to short-term variation, but show continuity on longer timescales.

Involution, commercial expansion, and living standards

Boserup’s generalized model of agrarian intensification closely resembles Philip Huang’s involutionary model of China. However, a number of important differences in perspective exist. Whereas Huang envisions his model of involutionary growth as being a specifically Chinese phenomenon, it is in fact an example of a general pattern of pre-modern economic development. The problem in Huang’s work thus lies less in his analysis of the Chinese economy than in his contrasting of this with an idealized “Euro-American experience,” where “agrarian change in the early modern and modern periods was generally accompanied by expansion in both absolute output and output per unit labor.”¹⁶⁹ Though Huang is also somewhat too pessimistic about the fate of the Chinese peasants, the main

¹⁶⁸ Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, 41.

¹⁶⁹ Huang, *The Peasant Family*, 12.

problem is his overly optimistic interpretation of the European economy.¹⁷⁰ China in the late pre-modern era indeed suffered from overpopulation, but overpopulation is in the Boserupian view a permanent fact of agricultural life, as, crucially, it is a relative phenomenon. Chinese peasants responded in the expected ways, by clearing new land, expanding to less populated areas, and intensifying their agricultural practices.

While Boserup herself did not include as central parts of her analysis markets, trade, and manufacture, as has been critically pointed out¹⁷¹, the Chinese case shows how it easily fits into her general picture. In addition to intensifying cereal agriculture, increased market access provided the Chinese peasants with a number of other opportunities for coping with population pressure. As previously mentioned, the shift to cash crops and the rise of rural manufacture can indeed be seen as a further intensification of peasant land use, as the extensive grain trade enabled cotton cloth, silk, and other manufactures to act as a proxy for cereal cultivation. The introduction of markets in the Boserupian analysis then presents us with only further layers of agrarian intensification.

The commercialization of the Chinese countryside was thus, precisely as Huang suggests, at least partly driven by necessity. But this does not mean that it was ineffective in countering the Malthusian trend of declining productivity. The latest study by Robert Allen suggests that agricultural labor productivity in the Yangzi Delta remained largely constant from 1620 to 1820, even at a comparatively high level—around 90% of British and Dutch levels, which were the highest known in the contemporary world.¹⁷² But, as the same study also shows, the opportunities for further intensification were not inexhaustible. Having reached an impressive level by the mid-17th century, peasant family incomes had by the 18th century entered a slow decline, as a result of a decline in agricultural work days available per household and decreasing prices on cotton manufactures. The same declining trend is visible in studies of real wages for China's small, wage-dependent population.¹⁷³ Huang's involutionary view then again comes out partially vindicated, but with the addendum that it was exactly what is to be expected of a pre-modern economy. Extraordinarily

¹⁷⁰ Pomeranz, "Beyond the East-West Binary."

¹⁷¹ De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 77–8.

¹⁷² Allen, "Agricultural Productivity."

¹⁷³ Allen et al., "Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in China, 1738-1925."

large rural incomes, as evidenced in the 17th century Yangzi Delta, were indeed extraordinary and could not be maintained over time.

However, as previously mentioned, the decline in incomes does not directly map onto a decline in living standards, contrary to what is sometimes assumed.¹⁷⁴ For example, the declining price of cotton manufactures not only meant declining incomes for the producers, but also a far greater availability of cotton cloth, which was strongly preferred over alternatives. Likewise, the increasing amount of land dedicated to sugarcane in the south must have resulted in the wider availability of sugar, a much coveted luxury. Although these developments are very hard to show directly with our fragmentary evidence, they seem highly plausible. This interpretation fits well with the evidence presented by Pomeranz, and should lead us to think twice before making broad statements about either improving or deteriorating standards of living in China.

A look into how rural markets proliferated in China in the 19th and 20th centuries gives us a good example of both the limits and the positive results arising from commercialization (see fig. 4). Aside from minor variation, the proliferation of markets in China did not influence greatly the number of inhabitants per market, which remained nearly constant at around 7-8,000. The proliferation of markets which plays an important role in the 'Second Commercial Revolution' was perhaps then not so much a commercialization of areas previously untouched by markets, but simply the result of strong population growth coupled with a constant population-to-market ratio. But what is also evident is the marked decrease of distance both from peasant to market and between markets following increased population density. This fact must have reduced transaction costs greatly, as transportation of goods over land generally was exorbitantly expensive.

¹⁷⁴ Deng and O'Brien, "Nutritional Standards of Living in England and the Yangtze Delta."

	Density: Persons per sq. km.	Average Population	Average area in sq. km.	Ave. distance traveled by most disadvantaged villager (km.)	Average distance (km.) between market towns
	10	1850	185	8.44	14.6
	20	3160	158	7.80	13.5
	30	4080	136	7.24	12.5
	40	4800	120	6.80	11.8
	50	5300	106	6.39	11.1
	60	5790	96.5	6.09	10.6
	70	6160	88.0	5.72	9.91
	80	6500	81.3	5.59	9.69
	90	6750	75.0	5.37	9.31
	100	6980	69.8	5.18	8.98
	125	7460	59.7	4.79	8.31
	150	7870	52.5	4.50	7.79
	175	8050	46.0	4.11	7.12
	200	8240	41.2	3.98	6.90
	225	8350	37.1	3.78	6.55
	250	8570	34.3	3.63	6.30
	275	8720	31.7	3.49	6.05
	300	8850	29.5	3.37	5.84
	325	8870	27.3	3.24	5.62
	350	8790	25.1	3.11	5.39
	375	8660	23.1	2.98	5.17
	400	8640	21.6	2.88	5.00
	450	8100	18.0	2.63	4.56
	500	7850	15.7	2.46	4.26
	550	7320	13.3	2.26	3.92
	600	7140	11.9	2.14	3.71
	650	6760	10.4	2.00	3.47
	700	6370	9.1	1.87	3.24
Average for					
Agric. China:	111	7140	64.4		
The modal case:	150	7870	52.5	4.50	7.79

Fig. 4: Average Area and Population of Standard Marketing Communities, as a Function of Population Density, 1948 Estimates

Source: G. William Skinner, *Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China*, I, 34

The relationship between long-distance trade and population growth in China is somewhat more complex. Generally, we may assume that the lower transaction costs associated with denser populations also incentivized trade over long distances, though to a comparatively lesser degree than short-distance trade. However, as have been argued by Pomeranz, demographic expansion in the less developed regions of China, which exported grain to highly developed regions such as the Yangzi Delta in exchange for manufactured goods, could have been detrimental to this trade.¹⁷⁵ As regions such as the Upper and Middle Yangzi (see fig. 1) became increasingly populated, they developed into centers of manufacture

¹⁷⁵ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 242–53.

in their own right, beginning a process of ‘import substitution’. Gradually, as the developed area of China expanded, long-distance trade between the now developed regions thus contracted and regional integration declined.

Serfdom, managerial agriculture and institutional innovation

Even institutional developments such as the decline of serfdom can be interpreted as responses to Boserupian growth patterns. As Boserup herself mentions, the use of unfree labor can be seen as a response to rural underpopulation, as a way to artificially intensify agriculture, and thus perhaps make it easier for landowners to exploit their land.¹⁷⁶ By the Ming-Qing transition, bonded labor was indeed most prevalent in less developed areas of China, and almost entirely absent in the Yangzi Delta, where it had disappeared far earlier. Following the general pattern of extensive development radiating out from the eastern core¹⁷⁷, bonded labor gradually disappeared as commercial development proceeded further into the country. In an increasingly commercialized economy, it simply made more sense for landowners to exploit their peasants commercially, through loans and rent, than through physical force.

Slightly more controversially, the changing fortunes of managerial agriculture can also be seen in the same perspective. It is telling that the cases of managerial agriculture expounded by Chinese scholars as signs of incipient capitalism in China are located in the North, away from the most developed parts of the country.¹⁷⁸ Philip Huang shows why this is the case: in the Yangzi Delta, even given the comparatively low wages prevailing there, landowners could make larger profits by renting out their land than by directly managing production.¹⁷⁹ It seems managerial agriculture is best fitted to places of intermediate development than either very high or very low. To talk of managerial agriculture as a sign of capitalism is then to miss the point completely.

This is not to say that economic institutions are *only* the product of the given level of demographic development. The relationship between institutions and economic expansion is certainly much more complex, and a topic of much debate among economic historians. But in a field such as economic history where institutions have long been seen as a key factor in

¹⁷⁶ Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, 72–5.

¹⁷⁷ Smith, “Introduction: Problematizing the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition.”

¹⁷⁸ Jing and Luo, *Landlord and Labor*; See also Xu and Wu, *Chinese Capitalism, 1522-1840*.

¹⁷⁹ Huang, *The Peasant Family*, chap. 4.

shaping development¹⁸⁰, that the causal arrow often points more strongly in the other direction is a point well worth repeating.¹⁸¹

China as a prototypical Advanced Organic Economy

The economic developments of 17th and 18th century China, as described above, conform well to the expanded Boserupian model of development. I would argue that this Chinese model can be fruitfully used as a prototype to understand economic change in what Wrigley termed Advanced Organic Economies. There is no need to categorize Chinese development in terms of a failure to modernize, or on the contrary as a case of early modernization or incipient capitalism. Rather, as a thoroughly pre-modern economy it was characterized by its own dynamics and developmental trends. These trends did not lead toward any specific goal, or in any case not a goal we could identify as modernity, although some of the processes of pre-modern development might well be *necessary* for the later emergence of modernity. In order to understand their significance, we must keep their pre-modern nature in mind.

That China did not conform to the perceived patterns of European economic development is no new insight. But what I suggest in this chapter is that *neither does large parts of Europe*. I argue instead that using the Chinese case as a model for Europe can bring us fresh insights into the essentially pre-modern nature of economic development in the 17th and 18th century French and Habsburg realms.

France

In the field of economic history, we have seen, China has always lived under the conceptual shadow of Europe. Its successes and failures are measured in terms of its conformity to idealized European developments, and given its lack of modernization, its dynamics has always been seen as wholly different from European ones. It is a curious fact that almost the exact same things could be said about the economic history of France, in the very heart of Western Europe.

¹⁸⁰ E.g. North and Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World*; Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*.

¹⁸¹ See also Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence*.

Just as with China, scholarship on the economic performance of France in the 17th to 19th centuries has long been characterized by what has been called a “historiography of retardation”.¹⁸² In its constant competition with Britain, both real and in the eyes of modernocentric scholars, France has often been seen as lagging behind in economic development, or as in some way blocked from participating in the British process of modernization. The backbone of the scholarly tradition of retardation consists of the classic studies of French rural history by prominent members of the *Annales* School, e.g. Marc Bloch, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Pierre Goubert, and Ernest Labrousse among others.¹⁸³ Through their widely acclaimed studies, these scholars drew a picture of the French countryside as caught in a Malthusian cycle of stagnation and poverty—“l’histoire immobile” (immobile history), in the words of Le Roy Ladurie—until at least the middle of the 18th century. Other prominent scholars of French economic history have gone further and denied the existence of real economic ‘progress’ until well into the 19th century.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, in the seminal work of Douglass North & Robert Thomas, France is characterized as an “also-ran”, as its institutions of property were too little developed to facilitate modernization.¹⁸⁵

However, since the 1970’s, a number of scholars have protested this characterization of French economic history, arguing that the French economy was not at all stagnant or lagging behind, but was rather modernizing just as effectively as Britain, just after another fashion. According to the distinguished economic historian Patrick O’Brien, that Britain was the first industrializer was only the result of “a less than remarkable conjuncture” of a broadly European trend.¹⁸⁶ In his earlier work with Caglar Keyder, they similarly argued that France performed as well as Britain in terms of economic growth through the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁸⁷ The same optimism regarding French growth and modernizing development in the 18th

¹⁸² O’Brien and Keyder, *Economic Growth in Britain and France*.

¹⁸³ Bloch, *Les caractères originaux*; Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*; Goubert, *Beauvais et Les Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730*; Braudel and Labrousse, *Histoire économique et Sociale de La France*.

¹⁸⁴ Morineau, *Les Faux-Semblants D’un Démarrage Économique*; Kemp, *Economic Forces in French History*.

¹⁸⁵ North and Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World*.

¹⁸⁶ O’Brien, “Provincializing the First Industrial Revolution.”

¹⁸⁷ O’Brien and Keyder, *Economic Growth in Britain and France*.

century is expressed by a number of other scholars.¹⁸⁸ Richard Roehl even went a step further and suggested that France could be seen as the *first* industrializer, in place of Britain.¹⁸⁹ More recently, Philip Hoffman has been powerfully arguing for a strong, market-driven development in the early modern age, ‘rescuing’ the French peasants from their supposed traditionalism.¹⁹⁰

As this long-running debate closely parallels the debate surrounding China’s economic history, using the Chinese example as a non-modernocentric model for France provides important insights into the nature of French economic development in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the following, I will propose an interpretation of French economic history based on the insights gained from comparing it with the China model advanced on the previous pages.

Basics

France by the end of the 17th century was the largest state in Europe, both in terms of area and population. The economic and social organization of French society was therefore extremely differentiated across its territory, we are often told. Still, compared to China, it was positively tiny, covering only a fraction of the territory, and with a seventh of its population. With a population at around 20 million, France is perhaps more comparable to the Yangzi Delta than China as a whole. In terms of population density, France was in the moderately high end of Europe at about 38 persons/km², but paled in comparison to the densities achieved in developed parts of China, where half of the population lived in areas with densities above 100 persons/km².¹⁹¹

During much of the 17th century, the French economy was in a bad state, as part of the broader general crisis of Europe at the time.¹⁹² Paralleling Chinese developments, by the turn of the century the economy shifted into an upswing lasting throughout the 18th century, until the revolutionary

¹⁸⁸ Poussou, “Le Dynamisme de l’Économie Française”; Moriceau, *Les Fermiers de l’Île de France*; Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*; Morrisson, “La Production Française Au XVIIIe Siècle.”

¹⁸⁹ Roehl, “French Industrialization.”

¹⁹⁰ Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*.

¹⁹¹ Goubert, “La Force du Nombre,” 12; Myers and Wang, “Economic Developments,” 568.

¹⁹² Hobsbawm, “The General Crisis.”

wars. Though it would be far-fetched to call this an era of peace and prosperity, as France was at war for most of the period, wars were generally kept away from French soil, and so in the life of most of the population, peace generally prevailed.

Demographic developments

During the 18th century, the French population grew considerably, from around 20 to around 29 million people, and thus finally reached numbers well above those achieved just before the arrival of the Black Death in the 14th century. In the traditional literature, much is made of this fact, which is seen as evidence that France had finally broken out of the *histoire immobile*. As the Malthusian wisdom had it, France as a traditional society was subject to a harsh regime of population stagnation, with death rates by necessity following birth rates through ups and downs. The evidence of a fall in mortality which was not accompanied by a fall in fertility in the 18th century consequently was taken to mean that a qualitative change had happened. Fernand Braudel accordingly described the 18th century as a “watershed of biological regimes” characterized by a “shattering” of a “biological *ancien régime*”.¹⁹³ Earlier literature similarly identified in the 18th century a “demographic revolution”.¹⁹⁴

Although there has been a good deal of criticism of this characterization¹⁹⁵, newer research still presents this population growth as the beginning of “the demographic transition”.¹⁹⁶ This term refers to the demographic developments from a traditional pattern of high fertility and high mortality to a modern pattern of low fertility and low mortality (see fig. 5, in which 18th-century France is supposed to be situated in the beginning of phase 2).

¹⁹³ Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, 70.

¹⁹⁴ Meuvret, “Les crises de subsistances et la démographie de la France d’Ancien Régime.”

¹⁹⁵ E.g. Goubert, “Révolution démographique au XVIII^e siècle?”; Morineau, “Révolution agricole, révolution alimentaire, révolution démographique.”

¹⁹⁶ Malanima, *Pre-Modern European Economy*, 36–47.

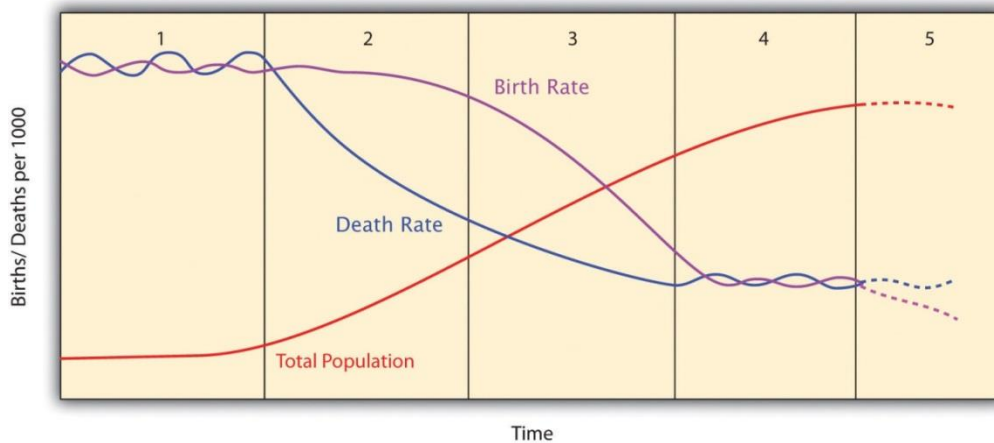


Fig. 5: Model of the Demographic Transition

Source: Wikimedia Commons

However, the modernizing interpretation of the population growth evidenced in the 18th century carries no merit. First of all, there is no evident reason to place any special significance on the population levels achieved in the 14th and 16th centuries. The conceptualizations of exactly this level of population as a natural population ceiling was based on outdated Malthusian theories of population dynamics that should not still be taken seriously. The Black Death, the wars of religion, changes in climate, and the other catastrophes responsible for the recurrent episodes of declining population cannot in any plausible way be said to be caused by the high population levels themselves, as would be necessary for these levels to constitute a natural ceiling. The surpassing of these levels thus does not merit any great conclusions about demographic revolutions, but should rather be seen as a merely contingent development.

As we have seen in relation to China, the strictly Malthusian vision that formed a central part of the stagnationist theories does no longer seem to hold up. This has also been shown regarding France, where no simple relationship between population growth and improved technological or economic conditions can be found.¹⁹⁷ Population movements cannot solely be explained in terms of levels of agricultural technology, but are the product of a more complex set of factors.¹⁹⁸ As is evidenced by the example of China, population densities can continue to grow to very large levels without any explanation connected with modernity. The temporal

¹⁹⁷ Weir, "Life Under Pressure"; Morineau, "Révolution agricole, révolution alimentaire, révolution démographique."

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Lieberman, *Beyond Binary Histories*, 59–60.

coincidence of French population growth with Chinese suggests that common factors may have played a role, and given that our climatic data fits population trends (compare figures 2 & 6), it would be no surprise if the warmer climate of the 18th century constituted a large part of the reason for the strong population growth of the century. A positive effect of the absence of large-scale domestic political troubles, and of foreign soldiers on French soil, between the end of the Frondes in 1659 and the revolution in 1789 also appears probable. Finally, we must mention the disappearance of the plague from France in 1720 as a probable factor.¹⁹⁹

It could be argued that some of the causes suggested were themselves part of a development toward modernity—for example, the emergence of the modern state might be taken as having helped to quarantine and control disease, reign in the behavior of armies and dampen political violence. But if one wishes to do so, one is left with the conundrum of an even greater Chinese population growth in a context very far from any modern state (see chapter 4).

When taking a more long-term view of population growth in France and China, as in figure 6, it becomes very probable that we need to find an explanation of the main trends in mechanisms common to both. This observation of broadly similar trends in Europe and China has earlier led to a number of scholars to argue that these similarities are evidence of a degree of global interconnection of the world economy exhibiting long-term cycles of economic activity and stagnation comparable to the modern business cycles.²⁰⁰ However, global interconnections are not necessary for the populations to show similar trends. What are required are simply mechanisms that impose similar consequences across the spectrum. Although the precise relationship between climate changes and population trends are certainly very complex and hard to pin down, it would certainly be surprising if climate was not an important factor. We could also look for global disease patterns, such as the global spread of the plague in the 14th century, which require only a minimal degree of global interconnection. Additionally, we should not disregard the possibility that chance played a substantial factor in the similarities of the growth trends, especially on the smaller scale.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*.

²⁰⁰ Beaujard, “Un seul système-monde”; Frank, *ReOrient*; also, to a lesser degree, Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*.

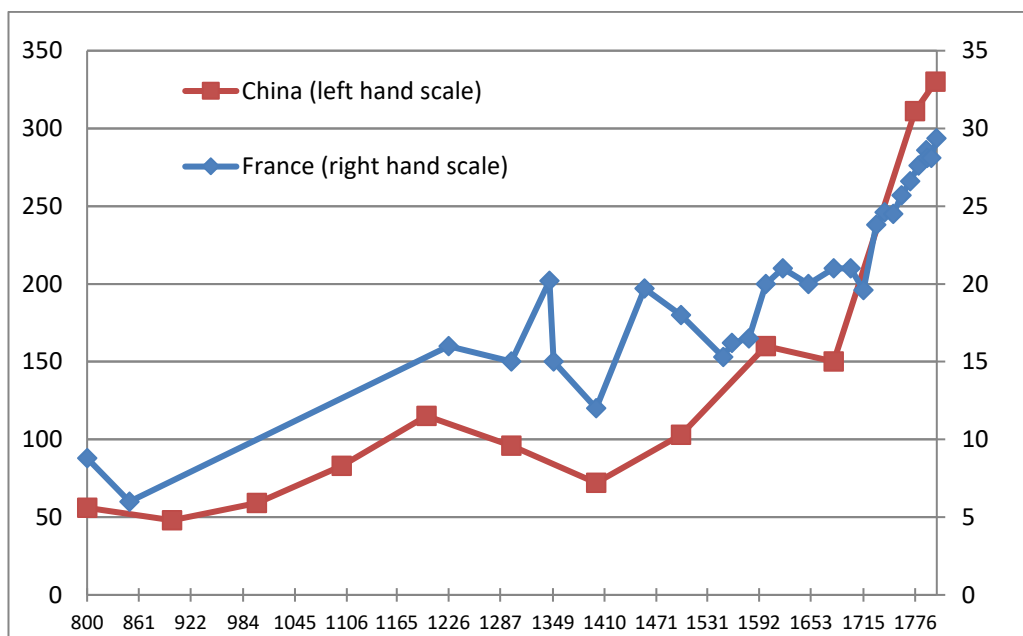


Fig. 6: Population of China and France (millions)

Source: Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China*; Jacques Dupâquier, *Histoire de la Population Française*; Paolo Malanima, *Pre-modern European Economy*

So, instead of interpreting the French population growth of the 18th century as the breaking of earlier Malthusian dynamics, as a sign of the way out of the Great Agrarian Cycle, or as a harbinger of modernity in the form of the demographic transition, we must put it in its pre-modern place. Agrarian populations in pre-modern times evidence a tendency to grow, absent any catastrophes of either epidemic, climatic or political nature. The relatively large growth of the 18th century is simply the result of a confluence of positive developments in all three aspects, and has nothing to do with modernity. The temporal conjunction of pre-modern population growth in the 18th century with the truly modern population growth of the 19th and 20th centuries, driven by scientific advances in areas such as medicine and hygiene, is merely a coincidence, and should not lead us to conclude that modernity stretched further back in time than it did.

Looking at the proportion of French population residing in cities also calls into question the idea of a steadily improving, modernizing Europe. The urbanization rate, defined as the proportion of the population living in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, rises steadily from 1550 to 1700, from a value of around 4% to around 9% (see fig. 7). After having reached its highest point in 1700, however, the number begins declining slightly throughout the 18th century. Similar patterns of urbanization are to be

found in the rest of northern Europe, with the usual exception of Britain.²⁰¹ When including inhabitants of cities with a population larger than 5,000 the numbers show a marked stability, with an increase of barely 2% from 1500 to 1700 and stagnation thereafter.²⁰²

	1500	1550	1600	1650	1700	1750	1800
>10,000	4.2	4.3	5.9	7.2	9.2	9.1	8.8
>5,000	9,1		8,7		10,9	10,3	11,1

Fig. 7: Urbanization rates in France – percentage of population living in cities with more than 10,000 or 5,000 inhabitants

Source: Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization*, 39; Anthony D. Wrigley, “Urban Growth and Agricultural Change”, 718

Though urbanization rates were stagnant through the 18th century, the period’s population growth meant that the absolute sizes of cities expanded greatly. Between 1700 and 1800 in France, the absolute number of inhabitants in cities with a population over 5,000 thus rose by almost a million.²⁰³ On the background of the population increase of the period then, even stagnant urbanization rates can thus be aligned with the image of urban prosperity and growth that we get from qualitative descriptions of the period.

Agrarian structure

Most descriptions of the general structure of French agriculture stress the great diversity of ownership forms and production methods even within relatively small areas of France.²⁰⁴ For making large-scale comparisons, however, a general picture can be assessed.

Throughout France, most farmland was tended by small-scale peasant cultivators. A large part of them owned at least some land themselves, with total peasant-owned land amounting to around 40% of the cultivated area. However, even within the peasant class, this land was very unevenly distributed, so that most peasant plots were very small, often less than 5 acres.²⁰⁵ The rest of the land was owned by nobles (20-25%), clergy (6%) and the urban bourgeoisie (20-30%). This land was rented out to local peasants in a variety of forms, with the most dominant being a form of

²⁰¹ De Vries, *European Urbanization*, 1500-1800, 39.

²⁰² Wrigley, “Urban Growth and Agricultural Change,” 718; Bairoch, Batou, and Chèvre, *La population des villes européennes, 800-1850*.

²⁰³ Wrigley, “Urban Growth and Agricultural Change,” 718.

²⁰⁴ e.g. Bloch, *Les caractères originaux*, xxv; Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*, 21–27.

²⁰⁵ Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*, 21–33.

sharecropping, in which the owner and tenant shared both input costs and the output in the form of natural goods. Through the period, though, these arrangements tended to be slowly replaced by commercial leases where tenants paid a fixed rent in cash to the owner.²⁰⁶

The 17th and 18th centuries also saw the establishment of some large-scale, entrepreneurial farming, mostly in the Paris Basin and the North-East, which, as has been done with their Chinese counterparts, has been hailed as the beginnings of a modern, capitalist agrarian production.²⁰⁷ However, newer research has shown that farm size did not affect productivity markedly, and that consequently the slight gains in productivity of these areas should rather be attributed to a reduction in transaction costs associated with better market infrastructure.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, these managerial estates were few in number, and during the 18th century again tended to lose ground to peasant smallholders.²⁰⁹

This picture of landownership is further complicated by the overlapping layer of seigneuries. As the remains of a more feudal structure of land ownership, the seigneuries were institutions with intersecting social, political and economic aspects. A seigneurie generally included full ownership of a piece of land, but also varying rights on the production of independently owned land, as well as a hodgepodge of ‘traditional rights’, such as certain jurisdictional rights and the right to buy property ahead of others. Over the late pre-modern period, seigneuries tended to lose their social and political aspects, and were treated more and more like a kind of private property, that could be traded freely – even to the point where they have been described as a kind of ‘investment portfolio’.²¹⁰

The period thus generally saw a commercialization of land ownership, with monetary payments being increasingly important, both as rent payment and as seigneurial dues. This fits well with a broader image of 17th and 18th century France as undergoing increasing commercialization.

²⁰⁶ Béaur, 114–9.

²⁰⁷ Especially by Moriceau, *Les Fermiers de l'Île de France*, 72.

²⁰⁸ e.g. Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*.

²⁰⁹ Miller, “French Absolutism and Agricultural Capitalism,” 148.

²¹⁰ Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France*, 25–41.

Commercialization

The commercialization of the French economy during the late pre-modern era is, like in the Chinese case, a complex phenomenon burdened with a strong notion of its significance for the development of modernity.

There seems no doubt that France in the 17th and 18th centuries experienced a large growth in trade volumes, both over long and short distances.²¹¹ Apart from the growth provided by the period's strong increase in population, there is also substantial evidence for a growing market integration, in what is often, anachronistically, referred to as the emergence of a 'national market'.²¹² The cause of this intensifying market integration was probably the further development, especially in the latter half of the 18th century, of an integrated road and canal network spanning the country. Additionally, the political removal of a number of internal barriers to trade might also have contributed.²¹³

The growth in trade volumes was coupled with the proliferation of small-scale markets through France. Although precise statistics are nowhere to be had, Braudel presents some evidence of the number of markets in the *généralité* of Caen in northern France by 1725, and compares this with numbers for Bavaria and England. In all cases, he finds a relation of about 1 market per 7,000 people.²¹⁴ Curiously, this is about the same ratio we found regarding China (see above). Although Braudel is very careful to note that we should not "suppose that there is some sort of law"²¹⁵, this could lend support to the Boserupian view that commercialization and market density is mainly a product of population growth.

The ballooning of foreign trade during the 18th century has attracted considerable interest among economic historians, who often attribute large transformative powers to foreign trade. For example, according to Peter Kriedte, "the appropriation of foreign purchasing power presented the only possibility of overcoming the limitation of domestic markets and of increasing the demand for industrial products".²¹⁶ The advent of modern

²¹¹ Léon and Carrière, "L'Appel des Marchés," 162; Hincker, *La Revolution Francaise*, 45–6.

²¹² Bateman, *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, 66–9; Braudel, *The Perspective of the World*, 315.

²¹³ Bateman, *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, 68; Braudel, *The Perspective of the World*, 316–7; Félix, "The Economy," 25–6.

²¹⁴ Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, 42–6.

²¹⁵ Braudel, 43.

²¹⁶ Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm, *Industrialization Before Industrialization*, 33.

Global History has exacerbated this trend, as global trade streams are increasingly treated as inherently important for the construction of the ‘early modern world’.²¹⁷

However, the importance given to foreign trade can be criticized in two ways. Firstly, the distinction between domestic and foreign trade is somewhat arbitrary, as it is solely a question of whether trade crosses state borders. As a result, geographically large states have correspondingly small amounts of foreign trade, relative to their total trade volumes, and small states have correspondingly large amounts of foreign trade. It is therefore no surprise that the Dutch Republic have a large part of their trade categorized as foreign, France a somewhat smaller part, and China a minimal part. The parameter worth comparing should instead be long-distance trade, however one defines ‘long-distance’. Secondly, before the advent of steam ships, long-distance trade made up an exceedingly small part of total economic activity. According to Paul Bairoch, by the end of the 18th century, even after a long period of strong growth of foreign trade, only about 4% of (territorially fragmented) Europe’s total economic output crossed national borders, and more than 75% of this stayed inside Europe.²¹⁸ As for intercontinental trade, Jan de Vries has recently reminded us that the total volume of goods sent annually from Asia to Europe at the end of the 18th century amounted to about 50,000 tons, which is less than a 3,000th of the current annual tonnage and could fit several times into one large modern container ship.²¹⁹ Despite a strong growth in long-distance trade, then, most trade by far occurred at more local levels.

At the other end of the spectrum, how far the commercialization penetrated into peasant communities has also been a subject of much debate. Older works of the *Annales* School tend to represent the French peasantry as isolated from markets, producing mainly to cover subsistence needs. According to this view, the market only became part of peasant life toward the end of the 18th century, where its forces proved destructive to the traditional peasant way of life. Newer economic history of France paints a very different picture. Already from the late middle ages French peasants can be shown to have been “deeply involved in markets”, resulting in

²¹⁷ Flynn and Giráldez, *China and the Birth of Globalization in the 16th Century*; Frank, *Re-Orient*; Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories.”

²¹⁸ Bairoch, *Commerce Extérieur*, 79; O’Brien, “European Economic Development,” 4.

²¹⁹ De Vries, “Understanding Eurasian Trade,” 15, for current numbers, see <http://container-news.com>.

“economic growth in the countryside”.²²⁰ A large number of prominent studies have now shown how the market was a large part of peasant life far back in time, and that French peasants maneuvered somewhat successfully through markets in a rational manner, at times even leading to increased output, i.e. growth.²²¹ The rehabilitation of the French peasantry has led to the conclusion among a number of scholars that market integration should be seen as the single most determining factor of economic development through the era, inspired in no small part by Douglass North’s New Institutional Economics.²²² However, as we will see, the economic developments of the 17th and 18th centuries are better explained through the Boserupian framework, with population growth seen as its driving factor.

Agrarian intensification

The development of French agriculture in the period is subject to intense debate over whether it experienced ‘modern’ market-driven growth or remained basically stagnant. As is the case for the debate concerning Chinese agriculture, the structure of the debate as being a question of either ‘development or stagnation’ conceals the fact that agricultural change in the 17th and 18th centuries might be better understood outside the framework of modernization. Following our China model, we will see that many of the differences of scholarly opinion can be resolved by interpreting French agricultural developments as a case of agrarian intensification of the Boserupian type.

The French countryside experienced large population growth in the 18th century, adding 6 million people to the already (in a European context) numerous peasantry. This growth necessitated an intensification of agricultural production on already existing land and/or the expansion of agriculture into areas previously unused owing to its lower quality. One of the consequences of this was the declining sizes of peasant farms.²²³ By the end of the 18th century, in the words of Gwynne Lewis, “well over half of

²²⁰ Hoffman and Rosenthal, “New Work in French Economic History,” 449–50.

²²¹ e.g. Moriceau, *Les Fermiers de l’Île de France*; Grantham, “Divisions of Labour”; Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*; Moriceau and Postel-Vinay, *Ferme, entreprise, famille*.

²²² Grantham, “Contra Ricardo”; Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*.

²²³ Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*, 31–3.

the agricultural workforce did not own enough land to raise, comfortably, a medium-sized family of four or five.”²²⁴

The rising pressure on the land is also visible in the relative price movements of various commodities. The single category of commodities that exhibited the largest rise in prices over the 18th century was the price of land, and thus the rents charged by landowners.²²⁵ This also helps explain why landowners increasingly preferred money rents to sharecropping agreements, as noted above. Following land, prices on basic foodstuffs also tended to rise faster than other necessities, and so tended to occupy a larger role in family budgets.²²⁶

These relative movements point to steadily falling real incomes of the French peasantry, especially the ones without surplus grain to sell, for the benefit of the landowning classes – nobles and bourgeoisie.²²⁷ The position of landless laborers was even worse. This is evident both when looking at the rent-wage ratio, which rose markedly throughout the period, and when looking at real wage data, which has been estimated to have fallen by as much as 25% over the 18th century.²²⁸

However, there were multiple ways for the peasants of responding to this threat. One such response was the shift from cereal agriculture to new world crops such as maize and potatoes, to secondary old-world crops such as chestnuts or buckwheat, or to cash crops such as vines or mulberry trees. This shift was often coupled with another strategy, that of cultivating previously unused marginal lands, as most of the new crops could be sown in somewhat worse conditions than was suitable for the traditional wheat cultivation. Additionally, all of these new crops were characterized by a considerably higher productivity per hectare than traditional cereals, and thus enabled land-starved peasants to make a living on their reduced plots. As a result, these crops spread fast throughout large parts of France.²²⁹

Especially the shift into cash crops was made possible by the extended reach of the market into peasant communities. This provides the stepping

²²⁴ Lewis, *France, 1715-1804*, 117–8.

²²⁵ Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvements des prix*, 443–6; Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*, 121.

²²⁶ Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvements des prix*, 357, 443.

²²⁷ cf. Weir and Sené, “Les Crises économiques et Les Origines de La Révolution Française.”

²²⁸ Hoffman et al., “Real Inequality”; Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvements des prix*, 609; Allen, “The Great Divergence in European Wages.”

²²⁹ Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*, 191–9; Miller, “The Economy of France.”

stone for Philip Hoffman's thesis that the peasants' increased market opportunities led to "growth in a traditional society", as Total Factor Productivity in his estimate rose by some 10-15% in the period from 1650 the revolution.²³⁰ But, as have been convincingly shown by Stephen J. Miller, this growth came at the expense of massive increases in the amount of hours worked by the peasants. The new crops all had markedly higher labor requirements than traditional wheat, and most of the new land put under cultivation required massive amounts of labor to be made sufficiently fertile. The increased market participation of the French peasantry is thus properly seen as a response to population pressure, mitigating the worst problems of the declining amount of land to each person, but not absolutely improving the life of peasants.²³¹ Seen in this light, the stagnation in agricultural labor productivity through the period is then not something to be lamented, but attest to the success of the French peasantry in staving off the decreasing returns to labor in a time of rapid population growth.

Another response on the part of the peasants was to take up part-time manufacturing work in one form or another. As there was a lot of seasonal variation in the labor required for agriculture, the periods of low labor requirement could be spent working in manufacture, either at home or in rural or urban centers of manufacture. Thus, by the end of the 18th century between a quarter and half of the employed population worked both inside and outside the agricultural sector.²³² The increasing supply of low-cost labor by landless peasants or peasants with insufficient land had the effect of gradually drawing industry out into the rural areas.²³³ The relatively strong growth of rural industry, together with the absolute growth of cities, resulted in a large expansion of industrial production during the 18th century. Although precise numbers are uncertain, it appears that French industrial production grew around 1% per year, a number comparable to the growth experienced in Britain.²³⁴ This fact of industrial growth is the primary evidence on which several scholars base their arguments that France was on par with Britain in industrial development.²³⁵ But while the absolute numbers might correspond between the two societies, what should be

²³⁰ Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*, 102.

²³¹ Miller, "The Economy of France."

²³² Grantham, "Divisions of Labour"; see also Postel-Vinay, "The Dis-Integration of Traditional Labour Markets."

²³³ Crouzet, *Britain Ascendant*, 26; Asselain, *Histoire Économique de la France*, 78–9.

²³⁴ Crouzet, *Britain Ascendant*, 21.

²³⁵ E.g. O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic Growth in Britain and France*.

of interest is not the net value of economic growth per se but rather the specific context and trajectories of economic development, which cannot be understood apart from its social embeddedness.

Industrious revolution?

Be that as it may, the expansion of proto-industrial activity throughout France has long been seen as a necessary stepping-stone to the development of modern industry. Already in 1923, Henri Sée commented that domestic industry was an “intermediate stage between the old urban professions and the big industry of the 19th century and which prepared the advent of the latter”.²³⁶ Likewise, in the tradition following Franklin Mendels, who originated the term “proto-industrialization” in the 1970’s, the expansion of rural industry in the 17th and 18th centuries is thought “as part and parcel of the process of “industrialization” or, rather, as a first phase which preceded and prepared modern industrialization proper.”²³⁷ In more explicitly Marxist approaches, the spread of rural industry is seen as “one of the central elements ... in the disintegration of the feudal system and the transition to capitalist society.”²³⁸

The most recently popular instantiation of this theory is that of Jan de Vries’ “Industrious Revolution”.²³⁹ Borrowing the term from Akira Hayami’s description of Japanese early industrialization, the term “industrious revolution” refer to the developments “during a long eighteenth century, roughly 1650-1850, in which a growing number of households acted to reallocate their productive resources (which are chiefly the time of their members) in ways that increased *both* the supply of market-oriented, money-earning activities *and* the demand for goods offered in the marketplace.”²⁴⁰ This reorientation originated in an “innovative consumer behavior” linked to “for lack of a better word, modernity.”²⁴¹ In de Vries’ view, an increase in the demand for consumer goods by agentic households, enabled by increased market access, fueled “northwestern Europe’s

²³⁶ Sée, “Remarques Sur Le Caractère,” 47, my translation.

²³⁷ Mendels, “Proto-Industrialization,” 241.

²³⁸ Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm, *Industrialization Before Industrialization*, 8.

²³⁹ De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*; De Vries, “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution.”

²⁴⁰ De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 10; The term is taken from Hayami, “A Great Transformation.”

²⁴¹ De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 52.

economic growth process”, and “preceded and prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution”.²⁴²

Haven taken the term from an East Asian context, de Vries is at pains to distinguish European from Asian industrious revolutions. In his view, “They are not the same thing, and the chief difference is located in the greater role of markets and specialization in Western Europe.”²⁴³ De Vries then contrasts an Asian industrious revolution, unconnected to markets and driven by necessity and population pressure, with a European industrious revolution, driven by market-oriented consumer demand. This distinction has then subsequently been reproduced elsewhere.²⁴⁴

However, the distinction proposed by de Vries, as well as his entire reinterpretation of the industrious revolution, seems to me to be somewhat unhelpful, as it both exaggerates the differences between East and West and paints a rather too rosy picture of the European experience. In the Chinese context, it is hard to imagine how weaving peasants could *not* be entirely dependent on market participation for generating the income needed – after all, the only way of supplementing your income by domestic manufacture is to actually market your products. And in the European context, scarcity of land seems most generally to have been the main driver for the growth of domestic industry.

In the French case, it has long been apparent, even to those who saw proto-industrialization as a stepping-stone to industrialization proper, that it was caused mainly by peasants with insufficient land to uphold their living standards. According to Henri Sée, the growth of domestic industry was the result of an abundance of man-power, as the limited amount of land per person forced peasants to take up manufacture on the side.²⁴⁵ This picture has been substantiated by several other scholars since then.²⁴⁶ An interesting further fact is the observation by Sidney Pollard that where there appeared good agricultural alternatives to intensify production, such as the cultivation of mulberry trees and other imported crops, the countryside often experienced de-industrialization.²⁴⁷ This lends considerable support to the view that, as was the case in China, the rise of domestic

²⁴² De Vries, 94, 72.

²⁴³ De Vries, 81.

²⁴⁴ Sugihara and Wong, “Industrious Revolutions in Early Modern World History.”

²⁴⁵ Sée, “Remarques Sur Le Caractère.”

²⁴⁶ Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm, *Industrialization Before Industrialization*; Lewis, “Proto-Industrialization in France”; Miller, “The Economy of France.”

²⁴⁷ Pollard, *Peaceful Conquest*, 77.

industry in France should really be interpreted as a proxy for agrarian intensification, driven by population pressure. While rural industry indeed did contribute significantly to the growth of the economy, measured in GDP or even GDP per capita, this should not lead us to forget the pre-modern character of this growth, which followed essentially the same trajectory as what we saw in China.

Living standards

The traditional, Boserupian, character of economic development in 17th and 18th century France is further corroborated when looking at trends of wages, consumption and living standards. In the historiography, opinions on the development of living standards are divided between an optimist and a pessimist camp, based on their use of different forms of empirical data.²⁴⁸ Scholars studying the movement of wages and prices have tended to support pessimist conclusions, as real wages declined through most of the early modern period. On the other hand, scholars studying probate inventories have tended to present a much more positive picture, as they show a tendency to include increasing amounts of objects, and not only among the rich.²⁴⁹ This assumed paradox can fit comfortably inside a Boserupian interpretation of economic development.

Returning to the question of relative price movements, mentioned earlier in this chapter, we would expect population growth to have the effect of raising prices of land and rent. This would tend to cause rises in grain prices, as well as that of derived agricultural products such as meat. Conversely, the surplus of labor produced would result in a relative drop in the prices of manufactures and items dependent on larger trade networks. This is exactly what was observed in the case of France by Labrousse.²⁵⁰ These relative movements would tend to have a marked effect on living standards, but not in a straightforward fashion, and not equally for everyone.

Among the lower classes, where food constituted the dominant budget item in the household, this would result in falling real wages and a lowering of the dietary quality. We see this evidenced in the marked decline in the

²⁴⁸ Zanden, “Early Modern Economic Growth.”

²⁴⁹ e.g. Morisson, “La Production Française Au XVIII^e Siècle.”

²⁵⁰ Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvements des prix*, 443–6.

amount of meat eaten per person, as less land could be dedicated to inefficient meat production.²⁵¹ The deterioration of the diet is also visible in the declining statures of young men registered by the army.²⁵² The rise in food prices also necessitated an increase in labor hours, as increasing amounts of work was required to feed a family. On the other hand, the relative fall in prices of labor-intensive manufactured products made some of these accessible to even relatively poor households.²⁵³ The same goes for luxury products traded over large distances – economics of scale, increasingly integrated trade networks and low wages tended to reduce prices of such luxuries as sugar or tobacco, making small amounts of these accessible for only a small part of a typical household's budget.²⁵⁴ We thus see increasingly malnourished, toiling peasants being able to enjoy the rare luxury of cotton cloth, a small piece of furniture, or a pipe of tobacco – a complex picture not easily fitted into the binary opposition of increasing or decreasing living standards.

Among the rich, land-owning classes, the rise in rents and relative fall in wages will have resulted in a large increase in income and a decrease in spending on wage-earning retainers, as well as the added bonus of relatively falling prices on manufactured and traded goods. All this together will have amounted to an extraordinary increase in the living standards, and the economic power, of landowners. Similarly, urban elites profited from the expansion of possibilities of trade, as well as falling wages of their employees. Overall, if your income was comfortably above what was needed on basic subsistence, your living standard will have tended to rise owing to the growth and diversification of luxury industries. If you were less well off, the picture was considerably more complex.

Sprouts of capitalism?

Lastly, it is worth considering certain developments which could merit the description of them as modern, namely the introduction of steam-driven, mechanical, large-scale industries in certain sectors. Most notable are the metallurgical corporations Le Creusot and Indret, which succeeded in the 18th century in establishing some steam-driven mining and metalworking

²⁵¹ Aymard, "Dietary Changes"; Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, 194–9.

²⁵² Komlos, "An Anthropometric History of Early-Modern France."

²⁵³ Béaur, *Histoire Agraire de La France*, 132–3; Morrisson, "La Production Française Au XVIII^e Siècle."

²⁵⁴ Morrisson, "La Production Française Au XVIII^e Siècle," 160.

industry, but also in other industries were modern techniques slowly introduced toward the end of the 18th century.²⁵⁵ But rather than showing the modernizing potential of the French pre-modern economy, these exceptions actually casts into stark relief the discontinuities between the general pre-modern nature of the French economy and the forces of modernization, which were completely alien to it.

Firstly, we must note the peripheral nature of these modern ventures. Far from playing any substantive role in the economy, they were few in number and limited in scope. In the important textile industry, technologies such as the *spinning jenny* and the *waterframe*, both crucial in British industry, were only slowly introduced into the French setting – by 1790, only about 900 *spinning jennys* had come into use (compared with an estimated 20,000 in Britain), and only a handful of places had incorporated the *waterframe*.²⁵⁶ Moreover, throughout the 18th century modern industries showed markedly lesser growth than traditional, artisanal or especially domestic, manufacture.²⁵⁷

Secondly, the limited success of established modern industry in the period is illustrative of their ill fit into the French economy of the times. None of these modern, industrial techniques of production were developed in France, and consequently every step of modernization was dependent on the assimilation of techniques developed in Britain, often aided by visiting British engineers.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, this assimilation frequently proved highly challenging, as the modernizers found conditions in France deleterious to their projects.²⁵⁹ The integration in France of modern technology thus transpired very slowly, and importantly, was heavily dependent on either state subsidies or the direct initiative of the state.²⁶⁰ As noted by a contemporary observer, in face of competition from rural, domestic manufacture, without subsidies from the government large industries could not survive at all.²⁶¹ Even the corporation most successful in the application of modern industrial techniques, the metallurgical giant Le Creusot, experienced severe difficulties in its establishment, even when subsidized generously by the state and aided by English experts – with the result that

²⁵⁵ Ballot, *L'introduction Du Machinisme*; Léon, "La Réponse de l'Industrie."

²⁵⁶ Léon, "La Réponse de l'Industrie," 249.

²⁵⁷ Léon, 250–1.

²⁵⁸ Asselain, *Histoire Économique de la France*, 81.

²⁵⁹ Poussou, "Le Dynamisme de l'Économie Française," 976.

²⁶⁰ Ballot, *L'introduction Du Machinisme*, chap. 1.

²⁶¹ Miller, "The Economy of France," 19.

their modern techniques of production were not copied by any other companies until well into the 19th century.²⁶²

The presence of a few “sprouts of capitalism”, as these modern ventures would be called in the Chinese tradition, should thus not mislead us into concluding that France had entered a trajectory of modern growth. Instead, the difficulties met in establishing these modern industries serve to underline the pre-modern nature of the French economy. The truly growing sector of the economy was rural manufacture, driven by the increased population pressure on the countryside, and not the tiny modern industry facing ruinous competition from the former.

The Habsburg Empire

Before we conclude by refining our Boserupian framework in the light of the Chinese and French historical experience, we must briefly turn toward our third case, the Habsburg Empire, to show how economic developments here fit into the general model. Although the economic structures of the Habsburg Empire differed substantially from those of France and China, when looking at its development over time, the trends appear to converge. This convergence suggests that we can profitably interpret Habsburg economic developments as largely produced by similar dynamics as in our other cases, only working in a different context.

The historiography on the Habsburg Empire’s economic development in the 17th and 18th centuries shows every sign of following the same pattern that we are now used to. Faced with the unrealistic comparison to an idealized ‘Europe’, though in this context rather a ‘western Europe’, economic developments in the Habsburg Empire traditionally have been found wanting. In what David F. Good named the “economic failure thesis”²⁶³, the Habsburg economy has been thought of as essentially “backward”²⁶⁴, and as a “traditional society breaking up”²⁶⁵. This negative picture has from the 1970’s onwards been challenged by a number of scholars, who have instead argued for the participation of the Habsburg Empire in

²⁶² Poussou, “Le Dynamisme de l’Économie Française,” 976; Asselain, *Histoire Économique de la France*, 83.

²⁶³ Good, *The Economic Rise of the Habsburg Empire, 1750-1914*, 6.

²⁶⁴ Henderson, *Britain and Industrial Europe, 1750-1870*.

²⁶⁵ Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 118.

creating a modern economy.²⁶⁶ In the words of John Komlos, “during the millennium before 1800, Europe as a whole built, little by little, the foundations of a modern economy, and Austria, as part of Europe, did not lag far behind.”²⁶⁷

As it was in our earlier cases, the problem with these views resides in a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of pre-modern development. When any economic change can be construed as modern, modernity becomes a permanent feature of Eurasian history. But seen in a Boserupian perspective, pre-1800 Habsburg economic development can regain its pre-modern essence while still providing room for the presence of substantial change.

Basics

By 1648, the Austrian Habsburg Empire came out of the chaos of the Thirty Years’ War that had engulfed central Europe as one of the largest and most powerful states in Europe, rivaled only by France. After the treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, in which Hungary was returned from Ottoman to Habsburg control, the empire’s core area attained a territorial size comparable to France, and the Habsburg emperors ruled a population of somewhere around 15 million people (see below). Through the 18th century, despite frequent wars not always fought successfully, the empire experienced strong population growth and a large expansion of the economy.

In economic terms, as in almost every other aspect, the various territories of the Habsburg Empire were quite disparate. In the West, the Bohemian and Austrian provinces were fairly developed, with comparatively high population densities and flourishing manufacturing bases, while most of Hungary was much less populated and had no industrial sector to speak of, much less any dynamic urban environments. But internal differentiation is of course ever-present anywhere at almost any level of analysis, and so this should not keep us from acknowledging certain common trends.

Demographic developments

Although precise population figures are hard to attain, due to both fragmentary evidence and the shifting boundaries of the empire, there is no

²⁶⁶ Good, *The Economic Rise of the Habsburg Empire, 1750-1914*; Rudolph, “The Pattern of Austrian Industrial Growth”; Komlos, *Nutrition and Economic Development*.

²⁶⁷ Komlos, “Austria and European Economic Development,” 218.

doubt that the Habsburg lands experienced considerable population growth from the end of the thirty years war to the Napoleonic wars. Various population figures have been given, but it seems that growth over the 18th century was in the order of about 50% or above - somewhat larger in Hungary, and somewhat smaller in Austria.²⁶⁸ This internal differentiation, with most population growth occurring in the least populated areas, was partially a result of the migration from west to east of peasants in search of cheap farmland.²⁶⁹ This process mirrors the Chinese experience of strongest growth in the least populated areas at two distinct levels: the first internally in the Habsburg lands, the second on a wider European level, where Habsburg population growth significantly exceeded that of more densely populated France.²⁷⁰

Urbanization levels in the Habsburg lands were comparatively feeble, but rose considerably during the period. In Austria and Bohemia, the urbanization rate (the percentage of population living in cities with at least 10,000 inhabitants) increased from 2.4 in 1650 to 5.2 by 1800, while in Hungary it was in effect zero.²⁷¹ For the entire empire, it was by 1800 still as low as 3.2.²⁷²

Agrarian structure

In contrast to both China and France, the agrarian structure of the Habsburg lands was characterized by a significant presence of bonded labor. Serfdom was overall the default state of affairs, with peasants owing a substantial part of their produce and their labor time to their feudal lords, to which they were legally bound. Although this was the case everywhere, the amount of labor time due to the feudal lords varied considerably across the empire. In Galicia, the burden could be as heavy as 6 days a week in the summer, whereas in western Austria it amounted to one day a week only.²⁷³

²⁶⁸ Dickson, *Finance and Government* estimates 11.7m in 1740 and 17.3m in 1789 (without Silesia and Galicia, which would add 1m to the first number and 3.5m to the second); Malanima, *Pre-Modern European Economy* estimates 15.5m in 1700 and 24.3m in 1800. Bairoch, Batou, and Chèvre, *La population des villes européennes, 800-1850* estimates 9.2m in 1700 and 14m in 1800.

²⁶⁹ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, 35.

²⁷⁰ See Malanima, *Pre-Modern European Economy*, 16 for comparative population densities.

²⁷¹ De Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500-1800*, 39.

²⁷² Malanima, *Pre-Modern European Economy*, 243.

²⁷³ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, 115–39.

During the 18th century, the dominating presence of serfdom in the Habsburg Empire waned. The most decisive break with serfdom came from above, as the state under the ‘enlightened’ governance of Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II sought first to limit the amount of labor owed by serfs to their lords, and then to eliminate serfdom altogether by 1781.²⁷⁴ However, the political decision to abolish serfdom was preceded by a slow bottom-up conversion of feudal into commercially organized agriculture. On a number of estates, landlords began splitting up their demesnes into smaller pieces of land to be rented out to peasants on commercial terms, as this resulted in higher profits.²⁷⁵ Other landlords, faced with a growing population of serfs and accordingly growing labor supply, converted a number of the serf’s labor dues into money rents, thus in effect converting them to semi-free tenants.²⁷⁶

The gradual fading of serfdom before its final death knell sounded in 1781 supports the above contention that economic institutions as often can be seen as the product of the level of economic development that as its cause. The relatively low population densities of the Habsburg lands was conducive to bonded labor, but as population increased, it became increasingly unprofitable to maintain an economic system best suited to keep peasants on their land in situations of labor scarcity. In Bohemia, high levels of labor service were introduced after the ‘Thirty Years’ War, which had had disastrous results for the local population levels.²⁷⁷ In Hungary, the same process can be seen immediately following the reconquest of 1699.²⁷⁸ Only after a century of significant population growth did the trend turn, as land scarcity overtook labor scarcity as the dominant problem.

Agrarian intensification and commercialization

With strong population growth occurring, the Habsburg lands experienced the same trend toward agrarian intensification that we have observed with our previous two cases. Total agricultural output increased markedly, but output per worker in agriculture remained stagnant at levels below what had been attained in 1400, though fluctuating somewhat.²⁷⁹ When we include in our estimates an apparent increase in hours worked

²⁷⁴ Dickson, 115–25; Klíma, “Agrarian Class Structure,” 67.

²⁷⁵ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, 120; Klíma, “Agrarian Class Structure,” 64.

²⁷⁶ Klíma, “Agrarian Class Structure,” 54, 62.

²⁷⁷ Klíma, 50–1.

²⁷⁸ Kiraly, *Hungary in the Late Eighteenth Century; the Decline of Enlightened Despotism*.

²⁷⁹ Allen, “Economic Structure and Agricultural Productivity in Europe, 1300-1800.”

per year, which seems probable, labor productivity in agriculture would seem to be falling.²⁸⁰ The number of animals in agriculture also seems to have fallen, indicating a stronger reliance on human labor, and a focus on optimizing land productivity rather than labor productivity.²⁸¹

Mitigating this trend was increased opportunities for trade. Even for the hard-pressed Polish serfs of Galicia, markets had played a large role in their daily lives for a long time.²⁸² But through the 18th century, population growth and political reform resulted in a significant improvement in the market integration of the various provinces of the empire.²⁸³ Although trade statistics are exceedingly hard to come by in the Habsburg realms, there can be no doubt that trade significantly increased inside the empire.²⁸⁴ Especially the grain trade from relatively lightly populated Hungary to the relatively densely populated areas of Bohemia and Austria was expanded considerably in the 18th century, in order to feed the increasing number of people in the western provinces of the empire.²⁸⁵

Following up on the speculations above concerning the relationship between market density and population, we can note that a quick look at the numbers for markets in the non-Hungarian part of the empire given by Dickson, compared to his population figures for the same year, shows a ratio of 8,261 inhabitants per market.²⁸⁶ This compares very well with the figures from Caen in France and Sichuan in China and supports further the view that market density is primarily, if perhaps not exclusively, determined by population density.

Manufacture

The expansion of empire-wide trade facilitated a substantial growth of both domestic and urban manufacture in the western provinces, particularly in the Bohemian territories. The most important of these manufactured products was textiles, as was generally the case with pre-industrial

²⁸⁰ Komlos, *Nutrition and Economic Development*, 171–2.

²⁸¹ Sandgruber, “Österreich,” 655–6.

²⁸² Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System*.

²⁸³ Bateman, *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, 79–90.

²⁸⁴ Kaps, “Trade Statistics in the Habsburg Monarchy in the 18th Century.”

²⁸⁵ Komlos, *Nutrition and Economic Development*, 104–5.

²⁸⁶ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, 36, 49 The figures from 1762 are 888 markets for a population of 7,336,000 .

production, but other industries such as ironworking also expanded.²⁸⁷ This growth in industrial production is presented by a number of scholars as clear evidence for the modernity of Habsburg economic developments in the 17th and 18th centuries. Following the early theories of proto-industrialization noted above, Good argues that the growth of domestic industry, “an intermediate type of economic organization between the handicraft and factory systems ... was an important step in the evolution of capitalist relations.”²⁸⁸ John Komlos goes a step further and describes it as “the beginning of the industrial revolution”²⁸⁹, and Herman Freudenberg likewise concludes that “By the end of the [18th] century, then, the Habsburg Monarchy, with Bohemia and Moravia foremost, was well into the preparatory stages of industrial revolution.”²⁹⁰ Farthest goes Richard Rudolph, who argues that “Austrian industrialization was well under way before the mid-18th century”.²⁹¹

This interpretation of manufactural growth as the beginning of the industrial revolution, I must stress at the risk of repeating myself, is profoundly misleading. As in our previous cases, manufactural growth was rather a product of population growth, and show the unmistakable signs hereof. First it should be noted that a large part of the new industry consisted of rural, domestic production. Even the large, urban manufactories have been shown in many cases to be completely dependent on rural production – undertaking only the final, capital-intensive stages of textile production, and leaving the rest of the production process to domestic workers.²⁹² Second, neither the urban nor the domestic manufacturers worked with any equipment that had not been available for centuries. As Freudenberg himself admits, “Modern machines had a difficult time ... until the middle of the nineteenth century.”²⁹³ What we observe is an expansion of traditional forms of industrial production in the context of a growing population, not a revolutionary process at all.

Supporting this view is also the fact that the growth of this rural manufacture was largest in the areas of the empire with highest population densities,

²⁸⁷ Freudenberg, “The Woolen-Goods Industry”; Rudolph, “The Pattern of Austrian Industrial Growth.”

²⁸⁸ Good, *The Economic Rise of the Habsburg Empire, 1750-1914*, 22.

²⁸⁹ Komlos, *Nutrition and Economic Development*, 170.

²⁹⁰ Freudenberg, “The Woolen-Goods Industry,” 402.

²⁹¹ Rudolph, “The Pattern of Austrian Industrial Growth,” 21.

²⁹² Klíma, “The Role of Rural Domestic Industry,” 53–4.

²⁹³ Freudenberg, “The Woolen-Goods Industry,” 402.

both on an empire-wide level and at the local level. The only exception to this pattern is the comparatively large expansion of rural manufacture in relatively rugged and mountainous regions of Bohemia, where population density might be a bit lower than more fertile areas.²⁹⁴ But this exception only lends support to the view that rural manufacture should be seen as an intensification of production in the context of increasing shortage of land. Rudolph also notes the correlation of population growth with the expansion of rural manufacture and additionally the production of iron, but interprets this in a (now outdated) Malthusian perspective, and thus flips the causation, so that he argues that manufacture creates population growth.²⁹⁵ But given what we can discern about the development of living standards, the Boserupian interpretation seems much more warranted.

Living standards

If the Malthusian interpretation of the expanding industry was true, we would expect to see that the growth of manufacture caused living standards to rise substantially, which would lead population numbers to soar. But as was the case broadly in Europe, living standards seem in many respects to have fallen during the otherwise economically prosperous 18th century. The main driver for this fall was a relatively large increase in grain prices, due to the increased pressure on the land. During the entire period, the prices of agricultural products (as well as land itself) rose faster than the prices of all other goods. With grain prices rising greatly and money wages generally stagnant, real wages declined strongly, especially during the 18th century.²⁹⁶ For most of the lower occupations, wages expressed in grain more than halved from 1730-1790.²⁹⁷ The decline in living standards is also evident by the continuing fall in the consumption of meat.²⁹⁸ Komlos, in his work of anthropometric history, notes how the stature of the Habsburg population falls throughout the 18th century, evidently as a result of a decline in nutritional standards.²⁹⁹ In his conclusion, otherwise positive in regard to the potential of Habsburg proto-industry, he even admits that “the immediate effect of industrialization in Bohemia and

²⁹⁴ Klíma, “The Role of Rural Domestic Industry.”

²⁹⁵ Rudolph, “The Pattern of Austrian Industrial Growth.”

²⁹⁶ Pribram, *Materialien zur Geschichte der Preise und Löhne in Österreich*; Zanden, “Wages and the Standard of Living in Europe, 1500–1800.”

²⁹⁷ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, 131.

²⁹⁸ Sandgruber, *Die Anfänge der Konsumgesellschaft*, 154–65; Komlos, *Nutrition and Economic Development*, 71; Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*, 238–9.

²⁹⁹ Komlos, *Nutrition and Economic Development*.

Lower Austria was to bring about a *deceleration in the rate at which the population's standard of living was declining*.”³⁰⁰ This conclusion fits perfectly into our Boserupian framework, in which the shift into more labor intensive forms of work staves off, but does not eliminate, the tendency to falling labor productivity.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, the traditional interpretations of 17th and 18th century economic developments in China, France and the Habsburg Empire show many problems, and lead to a number of conclusions that are untenable in a comparative perspective.

The commonality between various current interpretations, and the deeper reason for their problematic nature, is their tendency to view economic development as a one-dimensional process straddling the divide between pre-modern and modern economies. The view of economic development as one-dimensional is shared by both groups of scholars who I have here loosely categorized as “pessimists” and “optimists”. The pessimist views are broadly characterized by some kind of (neo-)Malthusian interpretation, and see the economy as essentially standing still, until it was at some point “liberated” by some constellation of modern economic forces and could finally “take off”.³⁰¹ This is the traditional view of economic history, poetically expressed by the economist Eric Beinhocker as “for a very, very, very long time not much happened; then all of a sudden, all hell broke loose.”³⁰² The optimist, revisionist views are broadly characterized by some theory of “Deep Modernization”, and see the modern economy as slowly but continuously growing out of what came before.³⁰³ Optimist views generally represent a reaction to pessimist views, led by supposed discoveries of economic change in the centuries before the industrial revolution. Though in stark disagreement over timing, both camps share a conception of “development” as a one-dimensional process, which they conflate with “economic modernization” (as visualized in figure 8).

³⁰⁰ Komlos, 180 (italics mine).

³⁰¹ For the notion of “take-off”, see Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*.

³⁰² Beinhocker, *Origin of Wealth*.

³⁰³ The term is taken from Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

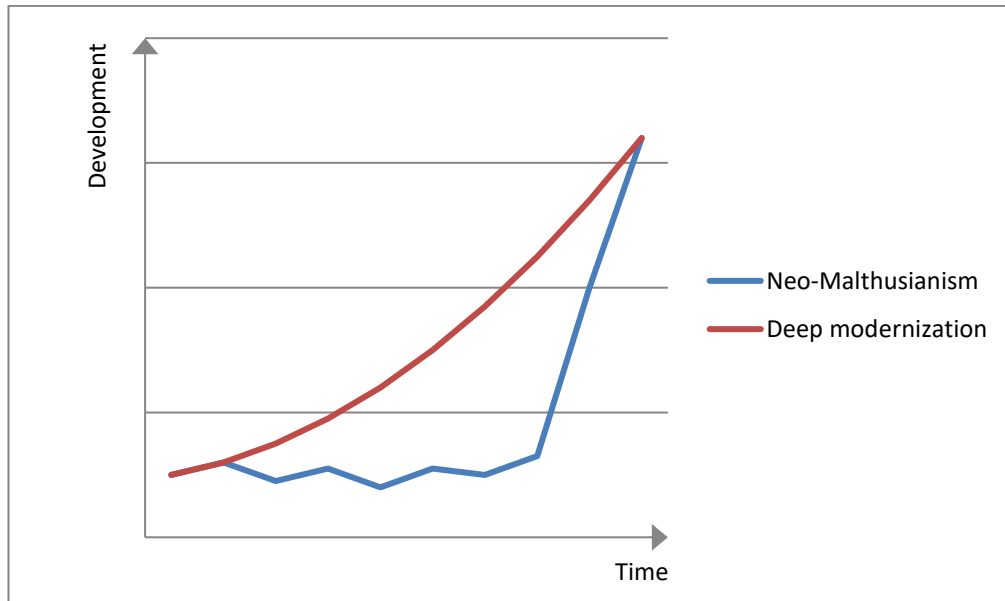


Fig. 8: One-dimensional Models of Economic Development

As I have shown in this chapter, this one-dimensional model of economic development, whether in its pessimist or optimist interpretations, is woefully inadequate. What is needed in order to make sense of the economic developments at both ends of Eurasia in the centuries preceding the industrial revolution is a model with a second dimension of *pre-modern development*. As I have suggested in the preceding analysis, this second dimension can be provided by a 'Boserupian developmental axis', as seen in contrast to a modern or industrial developmental axis (see fig 9). The economic changes undergone by all three cases here studied are best explained as cases of Boserupian development unconnected to any process of modernization whatsoever. Or, to stick with the terminology, it should be understood as movement along the Boserupian developmental axis.

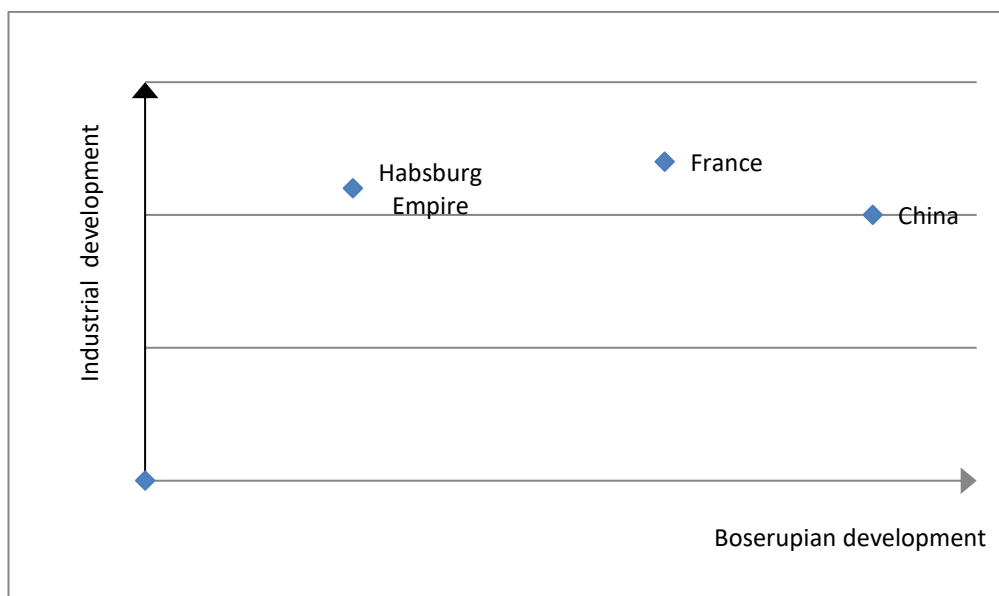


Fig. 9: A Two-dimensional Model of Economic Development

How should we characterize Boserupian development then, and how do we distinguish between that and modern development? Several implications of the Boserupian paradigm has come into focus in this chapter, and will be reflected upon here.

Distinguishing Boserupian development

The concept of Boserupian development refers in its essence to growth driven by the process of intensification of the economy owing to population growth, including its various secondary effects. The concept should be distinguished from earlier conceptual categories of growth, be it Smithian, Schumpeterian, Kuznetsian, extensive or intensive. It is rather a complex process involving several types of growth, as The Boserupian paradigm implies that what had earlier been regarded as ‘mere’ extensive growth actually involves various processes of Smithian and intensive growth as a natural consequence. At the same time, it distances itself from the modern, Kuznetsian and Schumpeterian, types of growth, which it implies nothing about. Boserupian development is thus a wholly pre-modern phenomenon, but involves economic processes that are sometimes assumed to be related to modernity.

Demography and Malthusianism

According to traditional Malthusian views, population levels was seen as dependent on a host of other factors, most importantly the quality of land coupled with the level of agricultural technology and organization. It has

become clear from the previous cases that this view is hopelessly outdated. Without any substantial technological change in agriculture, the populations of France and the Habsburg Empire grew by more than 50% in the 18th century, while the Chinese population doubled, in all three cases without adding new land at anything near comparable rates. It was thus evidently possible, even in the case of the densely populated Yangzi Delta, to sustain far more people by means of the same amount of land, and without any technological improvements. This possibility belies any notion of a Malthusian population ceiling.

The lesser changes in agricultural organization that did take place, such as the introduction of new crops and the commercialization of ownership arrangements, seem on the contrary to be *caused* by population growth, in the manner described by Boserup. They were all techniques that had long been available to producers, but were not introduced until made necessary or profitable by an increased population density. This would also help explain the slow spread of agricultural technologies in Europe previously thought to be pure ‘improvements’.

While population growth is of course not completely causally unrelated to technological developments, it is in a far more direct manner governed by the vagaries of the three great pre-modern catastrophes of war, bad weather and epidemic disease.³⁰⁴ Absent these catastrophes, agricultural populations show a tendency to grow, slowly but surely. Hence we see the classic zig-zag pattern of slow buildup interrupted by drastic falls. This pattern is evident both at the local and state-wide levels, and over both short and long timeframes. We can also note that there is no inherent necessity for the population levels to go either up or down in the long run, but on the longer timescales and on a global level, there is evidently a tendency to growth.

The simultaneous nature of population growth in both China, France and the Habsburg Empire very likely results from similar experiences of the three factors of order, climate and disease. Although all three states were at war fairly often during the 18th century, the wars did not have drastic consequences for the upholding of state order, and did not ravage the states in any significant degree. Global climactic developments were naturally also shared, most importantly the relatively warm climate of the 18th century. And no major outbreak of epidemic disease occurred at any point

³⁰⁴ Cf. Scheidel, *The Great Leveler*.

in the period, which also saw the disappearance of the plague from France and its relative amelioration elsewhere. Mainly due to these factors, the 18th century was a period of strong population growth in all three societies.

Population density and commercialization

The Boserupian development model also has interesting implications for the connection between population density and commercialization of a society. At a glance, the level of commercialization of a society is broadly congruent with its population density. This is illustrated well by the close relationship between market density and population density, where the number of inhabitants per market remains stable (at close to 8,000) despite population growth. As people live closer together, transaction costs drop, markets expand, and the cost of infrastructure declines relative to the number of people it will serve. Furthermore, a large reserve of labor is made available for services, including those connected with trade.

The declining transaction costs connected with population growth lead to some economic gains connected with trade. Individual producers are better able to specialize in market-oriented production, and this helps to drive up labor productivity, and thus works against the tendency inherent in agricultural intensification toward falling labor productivity. This specialization is also evident in long-distance trade, in which manufactured goods produced in densely populated areas are exchanged for cereals grown in relatively sparsely populated areas. This kind of long-distance trade could, however, be vulnerable to processes of import substitution, as lesser developed regions increase their population densities.

The institutional organization of the economy also changes with population growth. Or rather, the economic incentive structure changes, so that different types of organization of production become the most advantageous for the economically empowered groups in society. In situations of low population density, some form of bonded labor tends to predominate. Labor is scarce, and peasants tend on their own account to work few hours, as this is all that is needed to feed their families. Peasants thus produce only a small surplus available for extraction by the elite. If elites want to raise this surplus, they need to apply some form of coercion, and in this way artificially intensify production. With increasing population density, land rather than labor becomes the scarce factor, and therefore ownership of the land, rather than its people, becomes the important source of economic gain for the elite. Peasants simply cannot leave their land, because

there is no other land available for them. It thus becomes increasingly advantageous for the elite to rent out their land to free peasants rather than farm them using coerced labor. Thereby, the productive energies of peasant self-interest is released, and the landowners get a solid income, due to increasing prices of land, without having to do anything apart from collecting rent.

This process is evident in different forms in all our three cases. In China, manorial agriculture was long gone in the most developed areas, and disappeared entirely from the north in the middle of the 17th century. In France, the commercialization of the seigneurial structure was far underway, and continued its path all through the period. And in the Habsburg lands, where serfdom was still dominant at the beginning of the 18th century, landowners gradually began abolishing feudal arrangements on their land in favor of commercial agreements with a freer peasantry, up until this process was given powerful support by state decrees at the end of the century.

Intensification of production across sectors

The hallmark of Boserup's theory of agricultural growth concerns the intensification of agriculture in conditions of population growth by applying ever increasing amounts of labor to the land. The main criticisms of this theory have been its lack of focus on markets, trade and production outside the agricultural sphere.³⁰⁵ But as we have seen here, these further sectors can easily be accommodated within a Boserupian framework. The commercialization of a society, itself furthered by population growth, provides opportunities for peasants to orient their production toward the market, and thus reap the gains of specialization. This includes the take-up of industrial production, usually in the form of domestic manufacture. But rather than interpreting this shift to market-oriented production as a 'freeing of the peasants from the Malthusian yoke', as has been common in European history, we should recognize that it generally served as a functional proxy for agricultural intensification, somewhat akin to Philip Huang's thesis of involutory development.

This process of intensification of production across sectors is evident in several forms during the early modern era. Peasants shifted crops from traditional cereals to more labor intensive crops at both ends of Eurasia.

³⁰⁵ De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*.

These labor intensive crops included both food crops and cash crops. Where needed, agricultural production was supplemented by some kind of domestic manufacture, in most cases textile production. From the perspective of the peasant producers, these processes had the common goal of substituting labor for land in their household economies. So irrespective of the specific route taken, the common observation is one of increasing workloads coupled with stagnant or declining labor productivity.

The interplay of domestic industry and long-distance trade also holds an interesting observation. The shift of work hours into domestic industry at the expense of agriculture in the densely populated areas only works as a proxy for agricultural intensification if a surplus of grain produced elsewhere is available for import. This direction of intensification is therefore intrinsically connected to intensification processes in the lesser populated hinterlands, where there emerges a strong pressure to intensify production above what would be predicted in terms of population density. Shifting work hours into domestic industry in one specific area can therefore also be seen as a proxy for agricultural intensification *elsewhere*.

Another observation to make is the tendency to a ‘ruralization’ of industrial production over time. With rural labor increasingly available for industry as population increases, often at prices far below urban wages, industrial production tends to disperse into the rural areas at the expense of the more expensive cities, so far as the capital requirements for production are not prohibitively large. In China’s extremely densely populated Yangzi Delta, textile production was almost entirely rural. In France and the Habsburg Empire, the process of ruralization was still under way, but moved quickly during the period, supported by the weakening of urban guilds by political interference.

Proto-industrialization should therefore definitely not be seen as a stage of development preceding industrialization proper, but should be recognized as a process intrinsic to Boserupian development. It is thus an entirely pre-modern phenomenon. While in some aspects proto-industrialization can, indeed, be seen as preparing the ground for factory-based industrialization, such as in its disciplining of the work force, in other aspects it appears to be directly harmful. This is the case regarding the competitive pressures it puts on capital intensive production, which have difficulties underbidding domestically produced goods, as they have labor costs essentially below subsistence costs.

Some of the most important aspects of the Boserupian development model developed here are its implications for the relationships between living standards, GDP, and the population density of a given area. In the traditional one-dimensional development model, development could supposedly be measured in terms of GDP per capita, and was perceived as proportionate with the level of material living standards in a society.³⁰⁶ In reality, the relationships between these various factors were significantly more muddled.

While GDP per capita accords well with modern notions of development, it is a fairly misleading measurement of the dynamics of the Boserupian development dominating the period before 1800. As a number expressing the total value of goods produced per inhabitant, GDP per capita is blind to the value of leisure, and values all other products equally and abstractly, not leaving any room for qualitative distinctions.³⁰⁷ Over the 17th and 18th centuries, work hours increased for peasants in all three cases, but this fact is not represented in measurements of GDP. A rise in GDP per capita could thus be the result of an intensified production without any significant progress in labor productivity, or even in a context of its decline. Furthermore, there is doubt as to how precise such measurements can really be, and consequently of how much use they are. In the case of Maddison's pinning of Chinese GDP per capita to a stable 600\$ over more than five centuries, it is clear that this is a mere pseudo-quantification of rather qualitative judgements of the Chinese economy. Other measurements may simply reflect the capacity of the state to record economic activity rather than measuring economic activity itself. And even the more scrupulous measurements of GDP per capita fail to account for its often contra-intuitive and in any case complex relationship to the lived experience of the population.

As for these experiences, we can begin by noting Jan Luiten van Zanden's observation that population density, and therefore Boserupian development, is inversely related to wage levels expressed in grain.³⁰⁸ Expressed in manufactured goods, however, I would doubt if the same correlation holds. As we have seen, living standards cannot simply be expressed in a

³⁰⁶ See e.g. Broadberry et al., *British Economic Growth, 1270–1870*.

³⁰⁷ See Reinert, *How Rich Countries Got Rich and Why Poor Countries Stay Poor* for a deeper critique of the abstract nature of GDP.

³⁰⁸ Zanden, "Wages and the Standard of Living in Europe, 1500–1800."

single dimension and mapped onto any measure of development. With increasing population density, the nutritional standards of the population tend to deteriorate, as is also evident in declining statures. Conversely, certain luxury products and manufactured goods become much more widely available to the population. In a nutshell, people eat less meat, but wear cotton clothes. They work longer and harder, but can enjoy a pipe of cheap tobacco at the end of the day. We should wisely refrain from judging these developments to be either improvements or deteriorations in the living standard of the population.

Boserupian development as a central dynamic of pre-modern history

The application of Boserup's development model is traditionally restricted to relatively primitive societies. As I have argued in this chapter, when it is developed to include processes of commercialization, Boserup's theory is applicable to all agrarian societies, irrespective of their level of development, and can indeed help explain central features of this development. What I would further suggest is that the Boserupian development model should be seen as the central framework for explaining pre-modern economic history. As pre-modern societies are at all times dominated by their agrarian sectors, all economic life revolves around the dynamics of agrarian production, which are so well explained by Boserup. The structure of pre-modern economic history is therefore formed by the process of Boserupian development – the slow expansion of economic activity across the globe, coupled with continuing intensification of production everywhere. In this view, the economic history of the centuries preceding the industrial revolution can be seen as 'only' a further extension of these processes. Extensive, pre-modern, Boserupian growth is the central feature of economic history in this period, at both ends of Eurasia.

This realization sidesteps the various debates surrounding 'The Great Divergence'. We can comfortably accept that Chinas Yangzi Delta represents a level of Boserupian development over and above what was achieved in either France or the Habsburg Empire, or frankly anywhere else in Europe. This fact, however, does not have any direct implications whatsoever for the later modern developments growing out of Europe. While we may speculate that the development of modernity is not equally likely on all places of the Boserupian developmental axis, it is not in the least certain that The Yangzi Delta's placement on the far end constitute the most advantageous position. It also does not tell us much about relative GDP's per capita, relative living standards, and much more – but instead gives us

a framework in which more does not equal better, pre-modern 'success' does not equal modern 'success', and in which we can see pre-modern economic development as a process separate from the distorting influence of modernocentrism.

Bureaucratic Empires

Ce n'est donc pas à des circonstances particulières qu'il faut attribuer la perpétuité de son gouvernement, c'est à un ordre stable par essence.

It is not therefore to any particular circumstances that the perpetuity of its government must be attributed, it is to a fundamentally stable order.

- François Quesnay's *Le Despotisme de la Chine*, 1767

After capitalism, the second most important linchpin of modernity is the modern state. It should therefore not come as a great surprise that historical scholarship on state formation during the 17th and 18th centuries is deeply influenced by modernocentrism. The history of state formation in Europe is widely seen as the story of 'the creation of the modern state' out of the embers of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. The histories of single states either conform to this pattern, or, conversely, tell a story of failure to conform. Common for both is that all developments are interpreted as relating in some way to the phenomenon of modernization, which thus constitutes the basic framework for understanding state formation in this period.

Though normally couched in terms of Eurocentrism, the same problem exists with scholarship on Chinese state formation. For a long period, the Chinese state has been analyzed through the prism of the Weberian bureaucratic ideal-type, with scholars variously extolling the bureaucratic character of rule or casting their focus on the various ways in which corruption or arbitrary despotism weakened the state. Recent decades, however, have seen China scholars move away from these interpretations toward a perspective that analyzes Chinese state formation on its own terms, less structured by expectations derived from the European experience.

In this chapter, I argue that the insights derived from modern interpretations of Chinese state formation can be profitably imported back into the European context, seen as an illuminating example of pre-modern processes of state formation. In China, France, and the Habsburg Empire, state formation was governed by similar dynamics arising from the dilemma between state centralization and the problem of local power. In certain aspects, these common dynamics lead to a degree of convergence

in forms of rule, leading to the gradual emergence of the 'Bureaucratic-Imperial State' in France and the Habsburg Empire, and to its perpetuation in China. In other aspects, differences in the interstate environment led China to resolve the above dilemma in favor of centralization, whereas France and the Habsburg Empire were forced to resolve it in the favor of local power. This resulted in a major divergence in the relative capacities of the three states. However, this divergence can ultimately be contained within a pre-modern framework of state formation.

State formation in Europe and China

What type of state was the polity ruled by the French kings in the 17th and 18th centuries? Was it a feudal state, an absolutist state, a composite state, a fiscal-military state, a nation-state, a baroque state, or even an empire? The bewildering array of state typologies applied to France is indicative of the extent of the debate on how to theorize European state formation in late pre-modernity. In scholarship on the Chinese state, the same question is relatively easily solved: everyone agrees that for most of its history, it was an empire.

This contrast between European conceptual frugality and Chinese conceptual parsimony is a clear image of the traditional conceptions of European and Chinese history, still exerting their influence today. Europe is marked by dynamic change and China by stagnation. A primary reason for this contrast is that scholarship on state formation historically has been produced in order to explain the rise of the modern state in Europe. As theories and histories are created to explain this, they necessarily focus on change rather than continuity, evoking different 'stages of development' through which European states reached modernity. In China there is no rise of the modern state to explain, and scholars therefore accept the term 'empire' as covering almost the entire historical period. As the large-scale continuities of the Chinese imperial state have been perceived as requiring less explanation than European change, there have been relatively few attempts at gauging the dynamics responsible for this continuity.³⁰⁹

Moreover, the essentially backward-looking project of searching for the explanations for the rise of the modern state in Europe have resulted in a

³⁰⁹ See Wong, *China Transformed*, 1997, 79–80 for a similar argument. Refreshing exceptions are Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State*; Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*.

widespread teleological essentialism – the notion that a pattern of modernity was from early on at the core of European states, only waiting to be realized in the fullness of time. Generally, this teleological essentialism has taken one of two forms: one tradition proceeds from the identification of a set of specific modern elements of the state, and genealogically traces them back through European history to account for their emergence. Another tradition looks to more system-wide explanations in the form of certain ‘modernizing dynamics’ in European inter- or intra-state relations leading inevitably to the formation of modern states.

A useful example of the genealogical approach is Joseph Strayer’s seminal 1973 essay *On the medieval origins of the modern state*, which claims that “The modern state, wherever we find it today, is based on the pattern which emerged in Europe in the period 1100 to 1600.”³¹⁰ Strayer then analytically identifies modernity with a set of “essential elements of the modern state” which began to appear between 1000 and 1300.³¹¹ The elements identified are “Political entities, each with its own basic core of people and lands, [which] gained legitimacy by enduring through generations. Permanent institutions for financial and judicial business were established. Groups of professional administrators were developed. A central coordinating agency, the chancery, had emerged with a staff of highly trained clerks.”³¹² The teleological problems of this approach are evident. As the modern state developed in Europe, inevitably it will share certain traits with its forerunners in earlier centuries. But this is of course no guarantee of the modernity of the relevant traits, or of their importance to the emergence of the modern state.

The alternative approach of looking for the origins of the modern state not in any number of specific *elements*, but rather in certain modernizing *dynamics*, is exemplified by Michael Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power*. To Mann, the explanation for the formation of modern states must be sought in the “essential continuity of [a] dynamic” put in place at some point during the European Dark Ages, before the turn of the first millennium.³¹³ Explanations that center on later developments are “weak ... for one reason: They start *too late* in history.”³¹⁴ Another example could be that of Patricia Crone, who in her *Pre-Industrial Societies* also subscribes to the idea

³¹⁰ Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, 12.

³¹¹ Strayer, 34.

³¹² Strayer, 34.

³¹³ Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, 500.

³¹⁴ Mann, 501, Italics in original.

that the emergence of the modern state was decided early on. From the 16th century, she writes, “everything ... simply spells out implications of the previous development”.³¹⁵ Similarly, she claims that “all [societies] were developing along the lines laid down in their respective formative periods.”³¹⁶ In both these cases, a modernizing dynamic is claimed to have been instituted early in European history, leading inevitably toward the formation of the modern nation-state. Apart from its obvious teleological problems, this strategy also reproduces a unidirectional model of state formation in which all change in the history of European states led in the same direction, which is that of modernization.

Come globalization

In the context of the recent globalization of history, the problem arises of how to fit the Chinese experience of state formation into these general frameworks. In most cases, the history of the East is simply left out of the picture (as with Strayer³¹⁷), or relegated to a place of stagnation on the sidelines of history (as with Mann). In the recent couple of decades, however, a number of China scholars and global historians have in various ways sought to remedy this problem, by incorporating the history of the Chinese state into the established framework of early modern state formation.

Responding to the genealogical approach described above, a number of scholars have sought to include China in the world historical framework by identifying some number of supposedly modern traits in the late imperial Chinese state – in most instances quite an easy task. For example, Evelyn Rawski claims that the Qing can reasonably be called early modern due to the presence there of sophisticated methods of revenue collection, administrative centralization, refined mapmaking etc.³¹⁸ Laura Hostetler similarly claims that the Qing state was equally part of the ‘early modern world’, as shown by their uses of “early modern cartographic and ethnographic modes of representation”.³¹⁹ Based on the Yongzheng emperor’s “drive to rationalize bureaucratic administration and centralize imperial control” William Rowe brands him “an early-modern state-maker of the

³¹⁵ Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies*, 170.

³¹⁶ Crone, 171.

³¹⁷ Strayer himself notes that China does not fit his conceptual framework. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, 12.

³¹⁸ Rawski, “The Qing Formation and the Early-Modern Period.”

³¹⁹ Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*, 2.

first order.”³²⁰ Taking this process to its logical conclusion, Francis Fukuyama claims that the modern state was in fact invented in ancient China, which saw the establishment of bureaucratic modes of rule.³²¹

The claims that the presence of specific traits traditionally connected with modernity somehow makes the Chinese state also modern (or early modern) fail for the same reasons as they do in the European case: because the claim that these traits signify modernity is itself spurious and unargued. Due to the genealogical reasons for their status as modern, modernity becomes equated with similarity to Europe. It then simply becomes an empty exercise in finding something that looks like Europe, and using this as evidence of the modernity of the Chinese state. The ultimate absurdity of this endeavor should be obvious from the case of Fukuyama’s supposedly modern ancient Chinese state.

A more promising way of integrating Eastern and Western state formation into a more common framework would be to deal instead with the dynamics of state formation, in a way that does not reproduce the teleological assumptions described above. A number of global historians have in recent decades engaged with this issue of political trajectories, and offered various global frameworks of state formation. Two deserve mention here, as they eminently exemplify both the strengths and the weaknesses connected with the currently popular paradigms of a ‘global early modernity’ or ‘multiple modernities’. The first is Victor Lieberman, who has worked to identify common global trajectories of state formation, the second Roy Bin Wong, who construes Europe and China as following fundamentally different, but equally successful and modern, trajectories of change.

Victor Lieberman’s massive *Strange Parallels* is an impressive attempt at creating a truly global history of state formation. Expanding on his study of Southeast Asian state formation between 800-1830, he argues for a number of parallel developments in state formation across Eurasia, driven not by any continent-wide integration, but by comparable sociological dynamics. In places as diverse as France, Russia, Japan, China and South Asia, as well as his initial Southeast Asia, he finds evidence of (1) increased territorial consolidation and penetration by the state, (2) administrative centralization, as well as (3) cultural integration around the dominant culture

³²⁰ Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 66–8.

³²¹ Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, chap. 5–7.

of the central state. Furthermore, Lieberman argues that these developments were roughly synchronized between all the societies he included in his study, owing to a diverse array of factors.³²²

There are reasons to be skeptical about Lieberman's claim of global synchronicity, at least at the level Lieberman implies. In order to fit all societies into the same mold, he often has to unduly stretch periodizations to the degree that they lose analytic value. For instance, the period 1240-1470 is characterized as a period of state breakdown, while 1430-1600 is dedicated to consolidation.³²³ The overlap between these two periods allows state breakdowns in some areas to coincide with state consolidation elsewhere, thus contradicting any claim of synchronicity. But aside from claims of synchronicity, the general trends of state consolidation identified by Lieberman are no doubt broadly correct, and genuinely thought-provoking as an attempt to unify Eurasian history.³²⁴

However, Lieberman's work falls somewhat prey to modernocentrism. In an earlier publication on the same theme, he describes his goal of seeking "to relax distinctions not only between East and West, but between 'pre-modern' and 'modern', regarding both distinctions in their more categorical form as self-flattering conceits."³²⁵ But as is so often the case, Lieberman's rejection of the distinction between pre-modern and modern ends up privileging modern dynamics as the main driver for history. In *Strange Parallels*, he ends up branding all his cases as "early modern", as the developments he describes are assumed to be essentially continuous with modern developments.³²⁶ To Lieberman then, the global history of the state ends up being an origin story of the modern (Western) nation-state, despite his claims that it is not.³²⁷

Wong, in his equally impressive *China Transformed*, argues for an almost opposite conclusion than Lieberman: that Chinese and European state formation proceeded along entirely different trajectories, owing to their different situations regarding domestic and interstate order. By analyzing

³²² Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*; building on earlier work in Lieberman, *Beyond Binary Histories*.

³²³ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 56–7.

³²⁴ See also Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*, 1:55–6 for a succinct appraisal of Lieberman.

³²⁵ Lieberman, *Beyond Binary Histories*, 95.

³²⁶ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 76–7.

³²⁷ Lieberman, 117–9; See Berry, "Was Early Modern Japan Culturally Intergrated?" for a similar critique.

Chinese and European state formation through a prism of different challenges, capacities, claims and commitments, he concludes that states at both ends of Eurasia had their different strengths and weaknesses due to the different challenges posed by their political and social environment – and that consequently no side should be seen as more ‘advanced’ or ‘modern’ than the other.³²⁸ Wong’s emphasis on seeing Chinese state development on its own terms rather than only in relation to Europe’s was certainly needed, and his identification of separate European and Chinese dynamics of state formation, neither of which is to be privileged as more ‘modern’, is very helpful in countering the problems of modernocentrism. However, Wong’s insistence that ‘modernity’ belongs to either none or to all, due to its supposed nature as a value-laden concept, leads to a failure to perceive the workings of the actual mechanisms of modernization sweeping over the world from the 19th century on. As Wong denies that “only one of these [Chinese or European] dynamics leads to “modern” state-society relations”, modernity ends up as the common goal of all societies, even if it remains distinct types of modernity to each society.³²⁹ The history of state formation thus remains a history of the emergence of the modern state.

European states revisited

Simultaneously with the above attempts at integrating China into the global history of state formation, a tradition has sprung up in European scholarship far more critical of the assumed modernizing trajectories of European states before the 19th century. The main target of this revisionist scholarship has been the ‘absolutist’ state developed under the Bourbon monarchs of late pre-modern France. This is particularly interesting, as the French state of the 17th and 18th centuries had traditionally been seen as one of the epicenters of the emergence of the modern state. This is true already from Alexis de Tocqueville, who described the emergence in the pre-revolutionary period of a truly powerful, centralized, and despotic state created ‘beneath’ the old order.³³⁰ The establishment of *absolutism* in France, as has become the byword for the creation of this newly powerful state, was long perceived as a stepping-stone to modernity. For nationalists,

³²⁸ Wong, *China Transformed*, 1997.

³²⁹ Wong, 283.

³³⁰ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, 59.

it served as a founding myth of the French nation-state³³¹, while for Marxist scholars it served as an intermediary stage between the feudal and the capitalist state – either as a class compromise between the nobles and the bourgeois, or as a tool of the bourgeois to break down the old order.³³²

From the 1980's the vision of an all-powerful French state has come under sustained attack from a variety of angles. A number of (mostly Anglo-phone) scholars studied the interaction of the monarchy with local powerholders more closely, and have come up with an alternative thesis that William Beik has summed up as “absolutism as social collaboration”.³³³ Instead of seeing the central state expand at the expense of noble power, these revisionist scholars argue that local powerholders retained or even reinforced their power over local society – in the words of Beik, they are seen to be “basking in the sun” of the *Roi Soleil*.³³⁴ Others have focused on how the supposedly modern state was to a large degree ruled by personal links of patronage and power broking, rather than through bureaucratic means.³³⁵ And still others have described the pervasive dysfunction of the various government institutions.³³⁶ Together, these revisionists deny the value of modernization paradigm as a tool for understanding state formation in France, and hold that France throughout the pre-revolutionary era was governed by entirely traditional, pre-modern means.

At the broader European level, there have also been challenges to the modernization paradigm. Abandoning the idea of a late pre-modern Europe composed of (proto-) nation-states, it has now become more fashionable to think of European states in terms of ‘conglomerate’ or ‘composite’ states.³³⁷ There has emerged a growing recognition that the unitary nation-state was only a product of the 19th century, and that consequently thinking of state formation in earlier periods through the prism of the na-

³³¹ Swann, “Le Roi Demande, Les états Consente,” 163.

³³² See Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 15–7.

³³³ Beik, “The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration.”

³³⁴ Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France*, chap. 13; inspired by Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*; See also Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*; Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*; Collins, *Classes, Estates and Order in Early-Modern Brittany*; Swann, *Provincial Power and Absolute Monarchy*.

³³⁵ e.g. Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France*; Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France*; Campbell, *Power and Politics*.

³³⁶ e.g. Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L'Absolutisme Bourbonien*; Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army Under Louis XIV*.

³³⁷ Gustafsson, “The Conglomerate State”; Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies”; Koenigsberger, *Politicians and Virtuosi*.

tion-state suffers from teleological problems. As Elliott argues, “If sixteenth-century Europe was a Europe of composite states ... its history needs to be assessed from this standpoint rather than from that of the society of unitary nation-states that it was later to become.”³³⁸ Regarding the continuing validity of the framework of the composite state up through the 18th century, Elliott himself remarked that the “monarchies of the eighteenth century remained essentially composite”³³⁹, a claim which has been further explored by other scholars.³⁴⁰

As the concept of a composite state denotes a polity consisting of several different territorial entities gathered under the authority of one ruler, Daniel Nexon has remarked that it in many aspects resemble the notion of empire.³⁴¹ Both state forms employed a form of indirect rule through intermediate elites, accepted a wide political and cultural differentiation between their territories, and organized their territories around a center dominated by the person of the monarch. Nexon uses this parallel to argue for the continued viability in late pre-modern Europe of dynastic-imperial modes of governance. Daniel Goffman and Christopher Stroop have similarly argued for the close comparability of the mechanisms of rule in European composite monarchies and the Ottoman imperial state.³⁴² Also Krishan Kumar has argued for the utility of interpreting European late pre-modern states as “empires in miniature”.³⁴³

A question of empire

So, instead of trying to integrate the Chinese experience of state formation into already established European patterns, perhaps the solution to the problem of finding a common framework capable of transcending the East-West dichotomy lies in the appropriation of the imperial model to the process of European state formation. In this lies a conundrum, as traditionally the political history of post-Roman Europe has been defined precisely by the absence of empire.³⁴⁴ In late pre-modern European historiography, the word ‘empire’ usually refers to either the overseas colo-

³³⁸ Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies,” 51.

³³⁹ Elliott, 70.

³⁴⁰ e.g. Hayton, Kelly, and Bergin, *The Eighteenth-Century Composite State*.

³⁴¹ Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe*.

³⁴² Goffman and Stroop, “Empire as Composite.”

³⁴³ Kumar, “Nation-States as Empires, Empires as Nation-States,” 124–8; Kumar, *Visions of Empire*; Kumar, “Nation and Empire.”

³⁴⁴ Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*, 1:1.

nial empires, or to the “dream” of reestablishing pan-European hegemony.³⁴⁵ But however much pan-European hegemony remained only a dream, the late pre-modern era did see a consolidation of sovereign power in the hands of a declining number of large, territorial, agrarian states, spanning several distinct communities of subjects. Foremost among them was France and the Habsburg Empire, which by the end of the 18th century, although they may have controlled only a limited part of Europe, ruled over a combined population the size of the ancient Roman Empire. The territories and populations of France and the Habsburg Empire were large and diverse enough to make them suffer from all the infrastructural problems associated with imperial governance, and so make them eminent candidates for the imperial typology. Following James Collins, “Rather than thinking of France as a coherent nation-state, we might do better to consider it a polyglot empire, with a wide range of local institutions adapted to the many local cultures.”³⁴⁶

What, exactly, is meant by the notion of empire? In recent years, the topic of empire has been of growing interest to a number of scholars, who have worked with various aspects of the imperial state.³⁴⁷ Most generally, an empire is a relatively large state, usually established by conquest, embodying various degrees of differentiation of rule across its territories, and supporting sharp hierarchies among its subject population in order to extract resources. This definition, which I have amalgamated from those found in the literature, distinguishes empires from nation-states, city-states and tribal groups, but is broad enough to include most other pre-modern states of a certain size. The broadness of the definition could lead to the seemingly reasonable objection that it becomes an empty term. The framework of empire is therefore here understood in a loose fashion, and serves mainly as a heuristic tool to disengage oneself from the teleological framework of the birth of the modern nation-state. It serves to give us a set of different expectations and perspectives, by which we can make sense of the structures and developments we observe in our period. When, as Peter F. Bang observes, “the problem of the pre-modern state ... turns out very

³⁴⁵ Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, 57.

³⁴⁶ Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 5.

³⁴⁷ Bang and Bayly, *Tributary Empires in Global History*; Bang and Kolodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*; Haldon and Goldstone, “Ancient States, Empires, and Exploitation”; Doyle, *Empires*; Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*.

much to be a question of empire”³⁴⁸, the framework of empire similarly becomes suited for exploring the dynamics of pre-modern state formation.

The modern and pre-modern state

In the following, I use the Chinese model of imperial governance to illuminate the dynamics of state formation in France and the Habsburg Empire. Specifically, I compare patterns of bureaucratic governance, resource extraction and military organization to show how similar underlying dynamics of state power shaped state formation in all three cases. Even though the result of these dynamics was in certain aspects a clear divergence between the Chinese state on the one hand, and the French and Habsburg states on the other, I find it both productive and necessary to situate this divergence squarely in its pre-modern context. None of the differences found here should imply that one state was more modern than another. As the modern state of the 19th century emerged out of late pre-modern European states, it necessarily shares some basic features with its predecessors, for simple genealogical reasons. But this does neither imply that the overall dynamics of state formation prevalent in Europe were responsible for modernity, nor that European states were developing in a direction of modernity.

The modern state is simply crucially dependent upon the technologies of modernity to function – primary among them modern means of communication and the power of an industrial economy. Before the advent of these technologies in the 19th century, states were severely limited in their power to control and effect change, and were subject to the same underlying infrastructural problems that universally shape the contours of pre-modern states. The historic developments undergone by European states in the centuries before the emergence of modernity took place in a pre-modern technological environment, and were ‘designed’ to make states fit into that world, not to create another.

The Chinese model of Bureaucratic Empire

The term ‘China’, although used freely above, is not a quite accurate description of the Qing state. It was a state created by the Manchus, origi-

³⁴⁸ Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*, 1:26–7.

nally a semi-nomadic people living northeast of China in a tributary relationship with the Ming dynasty (see fig. 10). In the first half of the 17th century, the Manchu ruler Nurhaci (1616-26) and his successor Hong Taiji (1626-36) consolidated the influence of the Qing state over the northeastern steppe and farmlands, while emulating the institutions of the Ming dynasty. By the middle of the century, as the Ming state was in complete disarray, the Manchus crossed the Great Wall, captured Beijing and crowned Hong Taiji's underage successor Emperor of China. Though most of China fell relatively quickly to the Manchus, the empire was only securely under Qing control after a series of revolts had been suppressed and Taiwan had been occupied by 1683, almost 40 years after the original incursion. The acquisition of China was followed during the next century by the Qing conquests of Tibet, East Turkestan (Xinjiang), and the rest of Mongolia.

China was thus only one part of what should more precisely be called the Qing Empire, ruled by emperors who kept strongly identifying with their Manchu heritage.³⁴⁹ But although the 'Manchuness' of the Qing at all times played a role in their rule, it is not far off the mark to say that, from an administrative perspective, the Qing ruled first and foremost as Chinese emperors. China proper was by far the dominant territory in terms of economy, population, culture, and most other aspects, and consequently the Qing state related primarily to that. The Qing ruled by taking over much of the ideological and administrative structure of the previous dynasty, making only some alterations. They governed from the Forbidden City of the Ming, in the tradition of the previous emperors, and through a bureaucracy manned mainly by Chinese officials, although at the highest levels the Manchus were far more visible.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*; Rawski, "Sons of Heaven."

³⁵⁰ Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, 44.



Fig. 10: Map of Qing China c. 1800

Source: Peter Perdue, *China Marches West*, 2

The central dilemmas of the state

In a functionalist perspective, the goal of the Qing state, as with other pre-modern states, was relatively simple. It was a machine for extracting resources from producers, and redistributing them upwards in the social hierarchy defined by the state itself. In the terminology of Shmuel Eisenstadt, its purpose was to create and extract “free-floating resources, i.e. resources – manpower, economic resources, political support, and cultural identifications – not embedded within or committed beforehand to any primary ascriptive-particularistic groups.”³⁵¹ In order to facilitate this extraction, it was necessary to establish sovereignty and a tolerable level of order. In this, however, lay a dilemma, as the enforcement of that order required the committal of resources into less free-floating arrangements. In order to hold power, local agents of the state needed to be embedded into local society, which again reduced their capacity to act ‘freely’.

Another dilemma regards the size and scope of the state. The establishment of order over a territory is dependent on the ability of the state to gather information about that territory, and move people and resources

³⁵¹ Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, 27.

across it.³⁵² In the most basic example, in order to suppress a revolt, the state needs first to learn of it, preferably as early as possible, and move an army to deal with it. Communication and transportation are accordingly the *logistical* basis of state power. Given that the difficulty of communication and transportation increases greatly with distance, especially in a pre-modern setting, there exists a tradeoff between intensive and extensive power. Briefly put, the smaller the territory of a state, the greater its ability to control it.

The system of governance maintained by the Qing should be seen as a response to the above dilemmas, adapted to the specific context surrounding the Chinese empire. The first thing to note regarding context is the near total lack of interstate competition. After their conquest of China Proper, no foreign power had the power to challenge the Qing. As had historically been the norm, the enormous size of the Chinese empire simply outclassed any other state competitors, who usually preferred a secure place in the Chinese tributary system to the prospects of war. Furthermore, the secondary historical threat posed by nomadic peoples on the steppe frontier, from where the Manchus themselves originated, subsided somewhat in the age of gunpowder warfare, to be finally eradicated by the closing of the steppe frontier in the middle of the 18th century. The resultant absence of external threats made the issue of internal control the primary challenge to the Qing state. A second thing to note is the enormous scope of Qing rule. The Qing state covered an immense territory, and ruled over hundreds of millions of people. The challenges involved in governing such a large area therefore meant that the state could only hope to establish a relatively weak level of control at the local level.

The institutional structure of the Qing state should therefore be understood as dealing mainly with establishing this extensive control, and not as attempting, and failing, to establish intensive control, as has been an implicit assumption in some historiographical veins.³⁵³ Indeed, many aspects of the Qing institutional structure worked actively against the establishment of intensive power. Keeping control over a large empire without external enemies meant, first and foremost, to impede the development of alternative power centers in the realm. Intensive state control over a local

³⁵² This section borrows heavily from Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*.

³⁵³ Notably Watt, *The District Magistrate*; Ch'ü, *Local Government*; Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*.

area required the buildup of powerful local actors, and as this would constitute a threat to the regime, it was generally avoided. At the same time, due to the lack of interstate competition, the Qing state was never obliged to intensify their rule. They did not need large armies or expensive bureaucracies, which would tie down resources locally, and retained an extremely lean institutional structure throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and onward. In the terminology of Michael Mann, the Qing state acquired a high level of despotic power, but a low level of infrastructural power.³⁵⁴ Following Philip Huang, the system of governance resulting from this can be termed “centralized minimalism”.³⁵⁵ The system of centralized minimalism has to European observers since the 19th century seemed grossly perverted, ineffectual, and plagued by corruption. But the very institutional structure that made the empire seem weak and ineffectual to early scholars was the same that kept the empire stable for centuries.

Emperor and state

At the center of the Qing state stood the emperor and his court. The imperial court stood, as courts do, as a curious blend between a personal household and a public institution. On the one hand, the imperial family seems to define the state to a degree that the term ‘the Qing Dynasty’ is often used as a description of the state. On the other hand, the emperorship of China was clearly an institution that surpassed in duration and symbolic meaning the family currently holding the throne.

The emperorship of China was a millennia-old institution consciously appropriated by the Manchus as they sought to topple the Ming.³⁵⁶ They thus placed themselves in a long line of legitimate rulers occupying the imperial ‘office’. The emperor held a fixed position in the Confucian cosmos, being the link between the divine Heaven and earth. Legitimacy was granted by the ‘Mandate of Heaven’, which presented the emperor with near-absolute power in the earthly realm, but at the same time imposed certain duties on him. The emperor had a responsibility to act as a father to his people, and to keep society in good order, in accordance with Confucian morals.³⁵⁷ The emperor was thus supposed to have an obligation to the economic and moral well-being of his subjects. He therefore, both symbolically and

³⁵⁴ Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State.”

³⁵⁵ Huang, “Centralized Minimalism.”

³⁵⁶ Rawski, “Sons of Heaven.”

³⁵⁷ Dunstan, *Conflicting Counsels to Confuse the Age*, 19–20; Bünger, “Concluding Remarks,” 316.

in practice, sponsored agriculture, seen as the foundation of wealth, as well as scholarship and culture more broadly defined.³⁵⁸

To conclude on the basis of this, as Karl Büniger has done, that “In Chinese political theory, and according to public opinion, the emperor was not considered to be an absolute ruler”, is certainly missing the mark.³⁵⁹ The Chinese emperorship was not constitutional in any form. But neither was the Chinese state just the plaything of the emperor, to use as he saw fit. It is rather the case that the very claim of absolute rule necessarily comes with absolute responsibility. And the Chinese system acknowledged no limits to the emperor’s power. As Chinese imperial ideology conflated the Chinese state with the world, the notion of the state as a patrimonial inheritance was out of the question. Instead, the emperorship was perceived as a part of the world order, irrespective of its current incumbent.

Differentiation of rule

Traditionally, the development of states is thought to be a unidirectional process proceeding from concrete, personal relationships of power, to more abstract, bureaucratic forms of rule. Categorizing the Qing state in either end of the spectrum would be futile, as it operated by very different methods over its different territories.

³⁵⁸ Crossley, “The Rulerships of China,” 1480; Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 224.

³⁵⁹ Büniger, “Concluding Remarks,” 317.

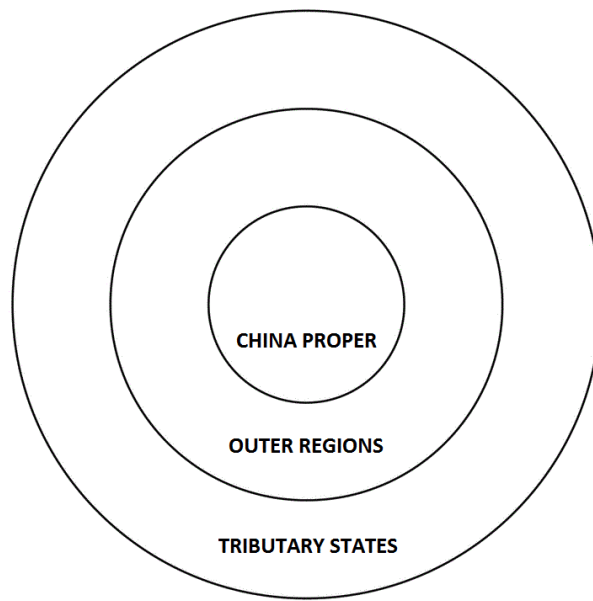


Fig. 11: A Model of the Qing Structure of Rule

The structure of rule can be described as radiating outward from the emperor in a set of concentric circles, each with a decreasing level of bureaucratic administration (see fig. 11).³⁶⁰ In the innermost circle we find what is generally known as China Proper, the area formerly occupied by the Ming. China Proper was governed by a bureaucracy manned by meritocratically selected officials, and was subjected to a homogeneous administration, with each of the 18 provinces having a similar administrative structure. Outside of China Proper, we find the outer regions – Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. The outer regions were governed indirectly, and loosely, through a variety of arrangements suited to the local needs – Tibet through the Yellow Hat Sect (of which the Dalai Lama is still a member), Xinjiang through local Muslim chieftains, and so on.³⁶¹ At the outermost level of control were the tributary states, (e.g. Korea, Burma, Vietnam etc.). These were theoretically subject to the emperor, but the only substantive consequence of this subordination was the expectation that the subjected states sent ‘tribute missions’ to the capital at fixed intervals. As these tribute missions were normally reciprocated with lavish gifts from the emperor, it is clear that the importance of tributary relations lay more in the symbolism of overlordship than in any economic benefits obtained by the Qing.

³⁶⁰ See Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order*, Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*.

³⁶¹ Fairbank and Goldman, *China: A New History*, 152–3.

Because of this layered structure, the ‘level of development’ of the Qing state looks very different depending on which part of the empire you look to. In the tributary realm, the emperor had mostly a ceremonial function. In the outer realm, the ceremonial function was overlaid with a patrimonial system of rule. And in China Proper, to the former two was added a layer of bureaucratic rule. Differentiation was also the rule at lower levels of the state. The levels of taxation inside China Proper differed greatly between provinces, with the wealthier, easy to control areas paying much more than poorer, less accessible regions. Areas populated by people outside the Chinese cultural sphere were mostly allowed to rule themselves, provided they submitted to the emperor.

Differentiated rule across the territory of the state was a product of the huge variations to be found between its numerous areas. It was simply impractical to rule the Mongolian steppes in the same way as the heavily commercialized Yangzi Delta. Method of rule followed the character of the specific territory, and should not be seen as a reflection of the level of development of the state.³⁶² The Qing emperors found it necessary to act not only as emperors of China, but also as Manchu and Mongol Khans, as well as Tibetan Chakravartin (Buddhist universal rulers). In the words of Pamela Kyle Crossley, the emperorship was “simultaneous” – its actions deliberately designed to be easily interpreted through a variety of separate cultural frames.³⁶³

However, differentiation of rule was not a goal in itself, and we should not err in the other direction by always expecting the Qing to ‘divide and conquer’. The Qing did not abstain from various homogenizing initiatives in parts of their realm. In some frontier areas, they did pursue a strong policy of “sinization”, creating incentives for Chinese settlers and initiating local leaders into the bureaucratic examination system.³⁶⁴ Within limits, the Qing sought to replicate its ‘Chinese’ system of control, which was the most dependable and effective of their varied systems.

Bureaucracy

Following Albert Feuerwerker, The Qing bureaucracy can be thought of as having a distinct two-layered structure: At the top level, the Qing state

³⁶² cf. Bang, “Tributary Empires and the New Fiscal Sociology,” 542.

³⁶³ Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 11.

³⁶⁴ Borei, “Beyond the Great Wall: Agricultural Development in Northern Xinjiang, 1760-1820.”

functioned by impressively bureaucratic standards, with formalized procedures, meritocratic recruitment practices, and central oversight (what Feuerwerker calls Level I). At the bottom level, government was informal, uncontrolled and driven by local power and initiative (Level II). Feuerwerker sees these two levels as characterized by opposite, conflicting dynamics, Level I tending toward universalism and specificity, Level II toward particularism and diffuseness.³⁶⁵ While this schematic is very helpful, it tends to understate the degree to which the two levels were in fact necessarily intertwined, often in practice being two sides of the same coin.

At the top of the bureaucratic pyramid was the emperor, aided by his central staff – the Grand Council, the Grand Secretariat, the Censorate, the Six Boards, and a number of other smaller institutions. Officials in these institutions acted as staff to the emperor, and actual governance was left to the provincial officials who stood directly below the emperor as well. China proper was divided into 18 provinces, which were each governed by a provincial governor, or in some cases, a governor-general. Additionally, governors-general were appointed to administer pairs of provinces together with their respective governors. The 18 provinces were divided into 84 circuits, containing around 180 prefectures, which were in turn divided into some 1500 departments or counties.

As noted, the administration of China was set up so as to effectively inhibit the development of alternative power centers – which implied close control of the upper layers of the bureaucracy. One tool for this was the doubling of the head offices in the central administration. Most of the central organs had two directors, one Manchu and one Chinese, and four vice-directors, also ethnically distributed.³⁶⁶ In the provinces, the presence of both a governor and a governor-general, with largely overlapping responsibilities, also served this function.

The nature of the Chinese bureaucracy is especially clear when we look at the lowest administrative officials in the bureaucracy – the county magistrates. The magistrate was head of one of the empire's 1500 counties (or departments), and ruled over a population of on average several hundred thousand people from his official seat in a walled city. The magistrate was a veritable one-man government. He was personally in charge of taxation, customs, justice, public works, postal service, education, public welfare,

³⁶⁵ Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, 19–24.

³⁶⁶ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 51–2.

religion and ceremony, local defense and more – in short, the total administration of his county. However, it was generally recognized that his primary duties were tax collection and the administration of justice.³⁶⁷

The large formal powers allocated to the magistrate can be severely misleading if one takes it to signify his actual power, since they were not followed by any substantial funding to back them up. Only a couple of sub-officials per magistrate were paid by the central government, and apart from this the magistrate was supposed to make do with his own relatively meager allocations, which were perhaps enough to cover the employment of a couple of personal secretaries. In practice, this lack of funding severely limited the power of the magistrate to perform his dedicated functions.

Moreover, funding was far from the only restraint on his powers. The appointment of a magistrate followed the ‘law of avoidance’, which meant that he could not serve within 250 km of his home town, and that he could not serve in the same province as a relative or any person he had taken the official examinations with. Additionally, a magistrate was limited to serving three years in any county, and often in practice served for an even shorter time, after which he was moved to another county or either promoted or demoted. Furthermore, magistrates were subject to yearly evaluation and control of their performance by the system of Disciplinary Regulations, which had broad powers of promotion and demotion, often demoting magistrates before their tenure ended.³⁶⁸

The magistrate was thus by design in a position far away from home, without any local connections, could often not speak the local dialect, had no official staff to speak of, and was bound to leave the county before being able to build up any substantial relations or knowledge of the county he presided over. This arrangement effectively removed any chance of magistrates building separate power bases independent of the central state, but at the same it severely limited the magistrate’s local power. In order to project any kind of power, and carry out his official responsibilities, the magistrate was therefore utterly dependent upon local people outside the scope of the central bureaucracy. Two groups of locals were essential to this – the unofficial clerks and runners employed by the county office, and the local powerholders in society, usually called the gentry.

³⁶⁷ Watt, *The District Magistrate*, 12; Ch’ü, *Local Government*, 16.

³⁶⁸ Watt, *The District Magistrate*, chap. 12; See also Thornton, *Disciplining the State*.

The county clerks and runners were local people employed by the magistrate's office to take care of the actual administration of the county. Although the central government allowed a certain quota of these sub-bureaucrats to be employed, no funds were allocated to paying them, and the quotas stipulated were anyway always far below what was required to perform the administrative functions they were responsible for. A typical county employed hundreds, or even thousands, of clerks and runners, and these numbers tended to grow over time as the population expanded.³⁶⁹ As no wages were provided by the government, clerks and runners subsisted by charging 'customary fees' to anyone who came in contact with the administration. This practice was often castigated by officials as a form of corruption, but it was absolutely indispensable to the functioning of the system of governance. The result of this mismatch between official regulations and local practice has been described by Bradley Reed as "a system of local administration about which the central government had only the vaguest knowledge and over which it exercised even less control."³⁷⁰

The second group the magistrates turned to in order to govern their county was the class of local notables usually labeled the gentry.³⁷¹ This group consisted of the locally resident graduates of the state examination system, who usually doubled as the large landowners and leaders of the local society. Being educated in the Confucian canon and officially privileged by the state, the gentry were the social peers of the magistrate, who therefore tended to find working with them easier than with his employed clerks. The position occupied by the gentry as intermediaries between magistrate and local society offered them a large influence over the administration, and they played quite an active role in governance.³⁷² When the state had to actively do something other than the regular gathering of taxes and administration of justice, the gentry was involved at every step of the process. In providing education, managing irrigation, building public works etc. members of the gentry usually took the initiative, provided the funding, and controlled the process.³⁷³

The clerks and the gentry, then, were essential to the functioning of the state, as they provided the magistrate with local power to govern. But by

³⁶⁹ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, 38–9; Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*, 57–9.

³⁷⁰ Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, 4.

³⁷¹ See chapter 5

³⁷² Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State*, 338–41.

³⁷³ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, chap. 10.

interposing themselves between the official state and the people, they also constituted the networks of real power in the county, sometimes at the expense of the magistrate. If set upon contriving against the magistrate, there was very little he could do to stop it – especially if gentry and clerks were working together. The administrative records are full of examples of this, and the officials constantly complained about illicit behavior on the part of the clerks and gentry, but in practice the state was powerless to change it.³⁷⁴ And following their disposition to act only when ultimately necessary, as long as the taxes were flowing and the sovereign justice of the emperor unchallenged, local society was in practice left to govern itself. This gave the central state a high degree of freedom, but limited its effective reach into society.

Resource extraction

The two-layered centralized minimalism of the Qing state is also evident in its most central function, the extraction of resources from the population. The most important mode of revenue collection was the land tax, which made up three quarters of government revenue. The other major source of income was the salt tax, which contributed roughly 12% - miscellaneous duties and taxes making up the remainder.³⁷⁵

The land tax was a universal tax on farmland, paid by all landowners, though the gentry paid preferential rates. Following the rising commercialization of Chinese society, taxes were for the most part paid in cash rather than kind, as had been the practice earlier. Collection of the land tax was the main responsibility of the county magistrate, whose future career was heavily dependent on his success in collecting the full amount stipulated by the Board of Revenue.³⁷⁶ Some 80% of the funds collected were to be sent to the central government, with the remaining kept for local use – in reality even more was sent, as a number of fees to the Board also needed to be included.³⁷⁷ Only 20% of income was bound up locally, with most of this going to the upkeep of military forces under central control. Seen from the top of the government, this constituted a quite centralized, effective system, as by far the largest part of the taxes became freely available for use at the discretion of the emperor.

³⁷⁴ Shigeta, “The Origins and Structure of Gentry Rule,” 375–9.

³⁷⁵ Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*, 80.

³⁷⁶ Watt, *The District Magistrate*, 173–5.

³⁷⁷ Zelin, *The Magistrate's Tael*, 25–37.

At the lower layers of government, the story was again another one. As the magistrate was the lowest official in charge, in practice the population was to a large degree left to tax themselves. In assessing tax rates, the magistrate depended on the help of the gentry, whose cooperation was indispensable for the success of tax collection.³⁷⁸ Methods of actually collecting the tax varied greatly, but were generally put in the hands of unofficial clerks, local tax farmers, village headmen, or other local power holders.³⁷⁹ As these were all unpaid, they secured revenue by demanding surcharges to the tax payments, much as the regular clerks and runners.

This illustrates a general point: The price payed by the state for official taxation being so effectively controlled by the center was that provincial administration had next to no resources left to perform their functions. The presence of customary fees, tax surcharges and other forms of irregular revenue thus had to be an integral part of the system. The populace paid clerks and runners, who paid magistrates, who subsequently paid higher provincial officials, who also needed ‘gifts’ and ‘voluntary contributions’ to run their administration. Rather than seeing it as examples of corruption, as has often been done in the literature³⁸⁰, it constituted a locally organized, second system of resource extraction placed somewhere between ‘state’ and ‘society’. The existence of this unofficial “Level II” was the flipside of the coin to the highly centralized “Level I”.

Another important characteristic of the Qing state that is especially clear in relation to issues of taxation is what we can call its “satisficing” nature. Satisficing is a concept developed by the economist and political scientist Herbert A. Simon as a more realistic alternative to the optimization strategy usually expected by agents in rational choice theory.³⁸¹ In its short version, the theory states that an agent facing a choice of action will, because of her lack of perfect information, not look for the optimal strategy in terms of what best achieves her desired objectives. She will rather look for the easiest way to achieve a result that somewhat satisfies her needs – something that is ‘good enough’. Thereby the agent exhibits a “bounded rationality”, that is, acts rationally within defined limits, though not as a perfectly rational homo economicus.³⁸² While the term is widely used

³⁷⁸ Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*, 34.

³⁷⁹ Wang, 39–48.

³⁸⁰ E.g. in Ch’ü, *Local Government*; Watt, *The District Magistrate*.

³⁸¹ The term was introduced in Simon, “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment.”

³⁸² Simon, *Models of Man*.

within organizational studies, behavioral economics and psychology, it has only sporadically entered the historical sciences although I find it very useful in understanding pre-modern, information-poor states.³⁸³

At every level of the Qing state, it acted in satisficing rather than optimizing ways, but as noted, taxation is a prime example. Readers of European history are used to expect rulers to be engaged in a constant struggle to extract every last penny from the populace, but in China this was far from the case. The Qing state had an explicit goal of reducing the tax burden on its people, emerging from both ideological and practical considerations. Consistent with the presentation of the emperor as father of the people, Confucian ideology emphasized the need to keep taxes low in order to guarantee the well-being of the populace: in the 18th century this received expression in the oft repeated idiom “storing wealth among the people”.³⁸⁴ On a more practical level, keeping taxes low was thought of as essential to avoid peasant rebellion or rioting, as was surely also the case.³⁸⁵ As The Qing state was not generally under any substantial threat, which could have necessitated a rise in spending, the regime had no need to increase their already sufficient revenue. The central state treasury usually ran a surplus, and total revenue even increased over time, owing to population growth, expanding some 50-60% from 1650 to 1800.³⁸⁶ As a result, the Qing never completed a cadastral survey, making do with updating those dating from the Ming dynasty, and even officially froze tax rates “permanently” from 1712, even though the population expanded significantly. The substantial underregistration of land that resulted from these decisions was not seen as a problem, but instead as a sign of imperial benevolence.

The total tax burden upon the peasantry consequently was comparatively light – Peer Vries makes a purposefully high estimate of 3-4% of family income on average – and declining over time. More realistically, it was perhaps half that or less.³⁸⁷ On top of this, however, one has to add the various surcharges and fees that made up ‘the Level II tax’, which perhaps

³⁸³ For examples of its application in the field of ancient history, see Kehoe and Kehoe, *Investment, Profit, and Tenancy*; Cartledge, “The Political Economy of Greek Slavery.”

³⁸⁴ Rowe, *Saving the World*, 251; Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 320; Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*, 28–30.

³⁸⁵ Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*, 34–5.

³⁸⁶ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 59–61; Deng, “The Continuation and Efficiency,” 345 This is true also in terms of purchasing power, i.e. grain equivalents.

³⁸⁷ Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*, 114 Vries makes the estimate based on an unrealistically high number for state revenue, by his own admission.

equaled the official rates.³⁸⁸ Even after this addition, it is clear that the state apparatus functioned quite cheaply.

Military power

In addition to collecting taxes, projecting military power was everywhere in the pre-modern world one of the central practices of the state. So it was in the Qing state, where around two-thirds of government revenue was spent on the military in peacetime.³⁸⁹ As had been the long-standing practice in Imperial China, the emperor at all times kept a standing army, which could be expanded if necessary in times of war. In the organization of its imperial army, the Qing state's practices of centralized minimalism and satisficing behavior can be clearly seen.

The Qing kept two distinct army organizations, each with completely different structures: the Military Banners and the Green Standard Army. The Banners were 24 military contingents (8 Manchu, 8 Mongol, and 8 'Martial-Chinese') created by the Manchus before their conquest of China, which acted as the elite military force of the Manchu regime. They were constituted as a separate social caste, occupation was hereditary, and they were placed in closed compounds at strategic places around the empire, especially close to the capital. The Green Standard Army was created from the remains of the Ming dynasty army, and was thus a 'Chinese' force controlled by the regular bureaucracy.

The number of soldiers is hard to ascertain, but we have some estimates. In the last phases of the Qing conquest, the bannermen numbered perhaps 300-500,000 and the Green Standard Army 900,000, totaling 1.2-1.4 million men.³⁹⁰ The Qing had no significant navy to speak of, as they had no pressing need for one.³⁹¹ After the completion of the conquest, the numbers were reduced markedly, as the state had no need of such an expensive force. During the 18th century, the state had on its rolls some 200-300,000 bannermen and 600,000 in the Green Standard Army, some 800-900,000 in total.³⁹² This number is of course very large in absolute terms, but compared to the Qing Empire's huge population and area, its army was actually

³⁸⁸ Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, 19.

³⁸⁹ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 62-3.

³⁹⁰ Worthing, *A Military History of Modern China*, 25; Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*, 291.

³⁹¹ Lococo Jr., "The Qing Empire," 125.

³⁹² Lococo Jr., 123; Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*, 291.

quite insignificant – at the end of the 18th century only about 3 persons in 1,000 were soldiers. Furthermore, it is important to note that these numbers refer to the paper strength of the armies. In real terms, the number of soldiers was certainly less, as no army unit operated at full strength.³⁹³ This is especially so in a situation where most of the army is rarely if at all called into action, and so no real incentive for maintaining full strength is forthcoming. At the height of military mobilization in the 18th century, at most 150,000 men (on paper) were put in the field, and usually the small frontier wars pursued by the Qing required much less.³⁹⁴

It was not only the number of troops that deteriorated in the long era of relative peace after the conquest, but also the fighting quality of the army. In the 18th century, many officials commented on the poor state of the bannermen, who resembled an effective fighting force less and less. Discipline was breaking down, and in practice many lived as civilians.³⁹⁵ Although the emperor shared this worry, no significant initiative was taken to ameliorate the problem, as it was never a pressing need.³⁹⁶ Also regarding equipment, the Qing army was far from ideal. As Nicola di Cosmo has shown, during their conquest of China the Qing made huge advancements in military technology, developing their use of firearms and cannon. But after the conquest ended, military development abruptly ceased.³⁹⁷ With the Ming defeated, all remaining enemies were already militarily primitive compared to the Qing, leaving no reason to further develop their fighting capacities.

Command of the army units was organized so that no military commander could threaten the Qing regime, which in practice meant that “effective mobilization against any really large-scale internal or external enemies was extremely difficult.”³⁹⁸ The Green Standard army was spread out over thousands of outposts across the empire, often with tiny contingents. Command was spread out between governors, governor-generals, provincial commanders-in-chief, and large numbers of brigade generals, who each controlled a maximum of 5,000 men, and only within a limited jurisdiction. Officers were recruited mostly by an official military examination

³⁹³ Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*, 292.

³⁹⁴ Vries, 293, 305; Worthing, *A Military History of Modern China*, 28–9.

³⁹⁵ Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 274–84.

³⁹⁶ Elliott, 304.

³⁹⁷ Di Cosmo, “Did Guns Matter?: Firearms and the Qing Formation”; See also Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

³⁹⁸ Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, 57.

system, and rotated regularly to inhibit the build-up of personal loyalties between soldiers and commander. Any mobilization of larger armies required central coordination and written orders by the emperor himself, and were usually put in the hands of commissioners from the imperial family or Manchu bannermen.³⁹⁹

The picture we get from the organization of military power in the Qing affirms what we have observed for its civil bureaucracy. Central control and the prevention of alternative power centers being built up was prioritized over functional efficiency. Army size was kept relatively low, and as long as no crisis erupted to challenge the regime, no serious effort was taken to maintain its fighting strength. This arrangement worked very well for the Qing until the shock of the Opium Wars, where they came up against the vastly superior fighting power of the British navy.⁴⁰⁰ The later defeats at the hands of industrial powers should not blind us to the fact that through the 17th and 18th centuries, the Qing army performed its functions perfectly - it remained the most powerful military force on the eastern half of the Eurasian continent at a comparatively low cost, conquering the Qing's enemies, while at the same time posing no threat to the civilian government.

Summary

All in all, the Qing Empire was a state geared to ensure the stability of its regime, substantially continuing the millennia-old Chinese tradition of empire. Rule was structured concentrically around the emperor, with declining intensity of control the further out you got. As the uncontested superpower in its region, the most dangerous threats to regime survival were internal, and so the administration was primarily adapted to handle these. The state was kept minimal at the ground, so taxes could be kept low, to avoid discontent. Conversely, the upper bureaucracy was tightly controlled, to prevent the emergence of alternative power centers. Military power was closely supervised and kept relatively cheap. This resulted in a state that was remarkably stable, but with very little reach into local society.

³⁹⁹ Lococo Jr., "The Qing Empire," 123–6.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

France – an empire in the making

At first glance, the French state in late pre-modernity looks utterly different from the contemporary Qing state – much smaller in terms of territory, placed in an entirely different interstate context, ideologically dissimilar, and organized in a very different fashion. But when looking closer at the functioning of the state and its change over time, the superficial character of some of these differences becomes clear, and we can begin to gauge the similar dynamics underlying state formation in both cases. Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the ideological and bureaucratic aspects of the French state increasingly began to converge on the bureaucratic-imperial form exemplified by Qing China. In other aspects, notably in their capacities for resource extraction and military mobilization, we observe a marked divergence between the Chinese and French state. However, the specific methods by which this divergence in the coercive capacities of the two states emerged imply that we should interpret them not through the framework of modernization, but as distinct, pre-modern adaptations to variations in similarly distinct, pre-modern environments.

In contrast to the Qing state, the French state was located in a decidedly hostile interstate environment. France was at all times surrounded by potential enemies, and therefore in a constant state of military competition – through the 17th and 18th century being at war more often than not. This competition put pressure on the state, necessitating its constant expansion in terms of resource extraction and military capabilities. The central importance of this interstate competition to state formation in Europe has been made clear by a number of scholars, most notably Charles Tilly, who epitomized this relationship as “War made states and vice versa.”⁴⁰¹

It is certainly the case that war was central in shaping the French state. As Peter Campbell writes, “Institutional change was almost always ad hoc and can generally be related to the imperatives of war.”⁴⁰² However, it can be doubted whether the developments of the 17th and 18th centuries should be interpreted as continuous with the creation of the modern state, as it has traditionally been. In fact, it is possible to argue, as Victoria Hui has done, that the pressures of war resulted in state *deformation* in Europe,

⁴⁰¹ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*, chap. 3; Building on Parker, *The Military Revolution*; most recently the argument has been made by Hoffman, *Why Did Europe Conquer the World?*

⁴⁰² Campbell, *Power and Politics*, 14.

because of the relegation of state power to private groups, a strategy she terms “self-weakening expedients”.⁴⁰³ Even though Hui’s conclusion falls short in view of the immense fiscal and military achievements of the late pre-modern European states, it does point to an important fact: that the organizational achievements of the French state (and other European states) in this period were reached by essentially pre-modern means. As in the case of the Qing state, “self-strengthening reforms” and “self-weakening expedients”, in the language of Hui, are really two sides of the same coin, and not two separate strategies, as she makes them out to be.⁴⁰⁴ Over the course of our period, the French state sometimes built up power precisely by empowering others, and at other times sacrificed effectiveness in order to retain central control.

King and state

The period between the 15th and 18th centuries saw a profound development in the perceived nature of the French state and its monarch. From the medieval conception of the state as the patrimonial possession of the king and his family, the state itself came to acquire a more defined permanence, with the king performing a defined position of supreme authority within it. The changed conception of the state and the monarch’s role emerged together with the establishment of the absolute monarchy. This development is interpreted in the literature as part of the emergence of the modern state in France, on its path to become a modern nation-state, and is explicitly contrasted with developments outside Europe.⁴⁰⁵ However, seen in a comparative perspective, the changes in French statehood can be interpreted alternatively as moving toward not the modern state, but as converging toward the model of the bureaucratic-imperial state.

The emergence of imperial ideology in the French court provides strong clues in this direction. The work of Frances Yates, and especially Peter Burke, has laid forth the multiple ways in which imperial ideology was appropriated by the French kings, most notably Louis XIV.⁴⁰⁶ The French kings were associated with the sun, or the ancient sun god Apollo, “with the implication that there is one supreme ruler in the world as there is one

⁴⁰³ Hui, *State Formation*.

⁴⁰⁴ It can be argued that the only way Hui can construct a contrasting example of a ‘pure’ self-strengthening is by going back to a period without good sources, namely ancient China.

⁴⁰⁵ Collins, “State Building in Early-Modern Europe.”

⁴⁰⁶ Yates, *Astraea*; Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*.

sun in the heavens.”⁴⁰⁷ The image of the king as a “Monarch of the Universe”, in theoretical possession of world supremacy, was a political statement intended to assert his undivided sovereignty *vis-à-vis* the Holy Roman Emperor as well as internal power contenders. This picture was coupled with the assertion that the French ‘empire’ was the successor to the Roman Empire, with the classical tradition constantly referenced to assert the parallels between the ancient emperors and the French kings.⁴⁰⁸

The image of imperial kingship projected by the Bourbon monarchs granted them supreme authority as ‘absolute’ rulers, placed above the law.⁴⁰⁹ But as we saw with the Qing emperors, the position of supreme authority came with a cosmological significance which subjected the French kings to act according to a number of principles of divine order. As a sacred ruler, the king was required to rule according to natural law, in the “image of God”, or else lose his divine right.⁴¹⁰ Simultaneously he was subject to a number of fundamental laws of the French realm, which cemented that France was not his possession, but that he only filled its most august office.⁴¹¹

In the influential book *Lords of All the World*, Anthony Pagden has described how the ideology of universal empire gradually became unfashionable both in scholarly circles and as a basis for notions of sovereignty over the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴¹² However, the demise of the imperial model was far from guaranteed even by the late 18th century. Curiously for this study, a number of influential French scholars in the mid-18th century, most famously Bertin, Voltaire, and Quesnay, began quite explicitly using the Chinese state as a model to be imitated. This was not idle talk, though their image of the Chinese empire was certainly idealized. As especially Bertin and Quesnay exerted considerable influence on royal government, late 18th-century reform was closely connected to their ideas.⁴¹³ This is especially evident in the French appropriation of the Chinese imperial ritual

⁴⁰⁷ Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 180; See also Mousnier, *Les Institutions de la France*, vols. I, 521; Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 165.

⁴⁰⁸ Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 158, 179–80, 193.

⁴⁰⁹ Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 164–7.

⁴¹⁰ Mettam, “France,” 50–1.

⁴¹¹ Mousnier, *Les Institutions de la France*, vols. I, 502–5.

⁴¹² Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France C. 1500–C. 1800*.

⁴¹³ Lewis, *France, 1715–1804*, chap. 7; Jacobsen, “Limits to Despotism.”

of the ‘tilling of the soils’, in which the emperor symbolically ploughed the fields, by both Louis XV and Louis XVI.⁴¹⁴ (see fig. 12)



Fig. 12: Louis XVI Tilling the Soils
Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Differentiation of rule

Alone among the major powers of Europe, France was not explicitly a composite monarchy, as all its territories (except tiny Navarre) were gathered under the royal title “King of France”. This fact, along with the usual teleological expectations, has led earlier scholars to present France as the prime example of a nation-state in the making. In recent years, however, this characterization has come under scrutiny by a number of scholars, who argue that in practical terms, France was indeed closer to being a composite state than a nation-state.⁴¹⁵ Terminology aside, it is clear that the French state was not governed in any unitary fashion. Different forms of control were instead adapted to local circumstances.

⁴¹⁴ Demel, “China in the Political Thought of Western and Central Europe,” 58.

⁴¹⁵ Swann, “Le Roi Demande, Les états Consente”; Miller, “The Estates of Languedoc.”

First of all, the territories of France were divided into *pays d'élection* and *pays d'états* in the familiar pattern of concentric circles around the center of government (see fig. 13). The *pays d'élection*, closest to the king, were governed 'directly', that is, by royal officials. The *Pays d'états*, provinces historically incorporated into the kingdom of France at a later date, were instead governed through provincial Estates – assemblies of local notables who were entrusted to govern their respected provinces in negotiation with the king. Further outside this structure was the colonial sphere, subjected to a variety of arrangements involving indirect rule. Other differentiated patterns of governance crisscrossed this arrangement. In the field of jurisdiction, France was divided into the Land of Customary Law in the north, and the Land of Written (Roman) Law in the south. Regimes of indirect taxation were divided following yet another pattern, dividing the territory between “provinces of the *cing grosses fermes*”, “provinces reputedly foreign”, “and provinces effectively foreign”.



Fig. 13: Map of Eighteenth-Century France

Source: William Doyle, Old Regime France, 263

The differentiated administration stemmed from the historical processes of territorial expansion and integration into the kingdom. The old territories of the kingdom were administered directly, while later additions normally were allowed greater autonomy. This compromise with local tradition was essential to keeping the kingdom together. As noted by Swann, "The relative success of the French Monarchy in integrating new provinces is better ascribed to its willingness to permit the continuing existence

of difference.”⁴¹⁶ We could then, instead of looking backward through the lens of the modern French nation-state, understand the French state as the imperial rule of the kings of Ile-de-France over its wider territories without stretching the imagination too far. Furthermore, rather than moving toward increasingly unified rule, over time the differentiation only proceeded further. Although a few provincial Estates were suppressed, the general tendency was toward the expansion of the Estates’ powers over their territory.⁴¹⁷ From the perspective of the center, this was accepted as it was coupled with an increase in funds received by the state through various channels.

Bureaucracy

The bureaucratic machinery of the French state has been at the cornerstone of the idea of France as the prototypical modern state, and at its surface it seems as far from Chinese realities as can be. In contrast to the Qing state’s minimalism, France has been described as “the most over-administered country in Europe.”⁴¹⁸ Looking at the raw numbers of government officials, we can contrast China’s stable 20,000 with some 50-80,000 in France by 1665 and increasing, for a population a tenth the size of China’s.⁴¹⁹ Nevertheless, there emerge some clear parallels between the workings of the two bureaucracies when looked at from a certain angle, which hints at the common dynamics governing both.

The number of French officials really did expand enormously in the late pre-modern period, but not for the purpose of state-building. An absolutely essential aspect of French office-holding was its venal character. Nearly all offices in the administration, except certain key posts, were sold to the highest bidder.⁴²⁰ The main reason for the growth of offices was the need to secure resources for the constantly underfunded state. Many offices had no administrative function. Offices were often doubled or even tripled, with responsibility shared between the multiple holders. The office holders for their part treated the office like “an object of trade”,

⁴¹⁶ Swann, “Le Roi Demande, Les états Consente,” 179.

⁴¹⁷ Swann, 165; Le Goff and Sutherland, “The Revolution and the Rural Community in Eighteenth-Century Brittany,” 98–9.

⁴¹⁸ Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 173.

⁴¹⁹ Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, 39; Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 138; Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 93.

⁴²⁰ Mousnier, *Les Institutions de la France*, vols. II, 41; Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 39.

with their main interest in securing office being the acquisition of the accompanying title and wage, as well as the opportunities for amassing more power and wealth through the levers of the state.⁴²¹

The venal character of state offices had deep implications for the functioning of the bureaucracy. Since the officials were completely secure in their positions, as a rule they worked slowly, if at all.⁴²² As the king was always in need of funds, he repeatedly exchanged patrimonial concessions for a reduction of payment to his bureaucracy. Consequently, on the one hand, the wages paid to officials with actual functions were always insufficient to perform these properly, leading them to subsist increasingly “by their hands”, that is, by irregular incomes such as commissions or extra taxes.⁴²³ On the other hand, royal control with the officials increasingly diminished, as offices became hereditary possessions no longer granted by the king. In the eyes of contemporaries, the increasing concessions to the officials created dangers of treason and revolt.⁴²⁴ In essence, the gradual localization and patrimonialization of bureaucratic power created dangers for the state of alternative power centers emerging in the realm.

The response of the central state to this danger was the institution of the provincial intendants. The intendancies were part of a select few bureaucratic positions not for sale, and therefore under direct bureaucratic control of the central state. During the 17th century, the 30 or so intendants evolved into the main arm of royal control in the provinces, so much that they have subsequently been seen as the central agents in the construction of a modern state in France.⁴²⁵ The old image of the intendants as all-powerful agents of a modern state bureaucracy, however, has been thoroughly discredited over the previous decades. Instead, the complex roles of the provincial intendants present us with a clear image of the dilemmas between centralization and local power, similar to what we have seen for Qing China.

The intendants were instituted as a centralized layer of bureaucracy above the already existing layer of royal officials. As effecting central control over the vast numbers of venal officials became increasingly difficult as their

⁴²¹ Mousnier, *Les Institutions de la France*, vols. II, 38.

⁴²² Mousnier, vols. II, 81.

⁴²³ Mousnier, vols. II, 37–8.

⁴²⁴ Mousnier, vols. II, 65.

⁴²⁵ Already from Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*.

numbers and patrimonial rights expanded, the intendants were partly established to keep an eye on the officials themselves.⁴²⁶ The responsibilities given to the intendants were practically universal, with tasks ranging from taxation, church regulation, commercial development, military security, social work and much more.⁴²⁷ In reality, the intendants did not have the means to perform all these functions. In the words of Francois-Xavier Emmanuelli, they had “only an embryonic bureaucracy and derisory financial means.”⁴²⁸ As a result, most of the intendant’s work focused on the central states top priorities: resource extraction and provisioning of the army.⁴²⁹

The prevention of the localization of the intendants was of central importance to the central government. Regulation similar to the Qing law of avoidance was in place, stipulating that an intendant could not serve in his home province or stay for more than 3 years in one post.⁴³⁰ This practice, enforced in the early years, seems nevertheless to have lapsed somewhat during the 18th century, when longer intendantcies were quite common. The prolongation of commissions was the result of apparent problems with controlling a province without establishing the networks of patronage and other personal relations required for the exercise of power in French society.⁴³¹ This is only one aspect in which the central organization of the intendants ran up against the problems inherent in the dilemma between central control and local effectiveness. A creeping patrimonialism of the intendantcy was also apparent in the regular appointment of the sons of intendants to the position of Joint Intendant to their fathers’ intendantcies.⁴³²

The dilemma is even clearer in the gradual appearance of ‘subdelegates’, who were local notables semiofficially employed to aid the intendant in his province, along with the intendants’ coterie of personal secretaries and clerks. The central government frowned on this practice, and repeatedly tried to limit both the number and the tasks of subdelegates. In an illuminating letter to the intendant of Lyonnais, the controller-general Colbert

⁴²⁶ Mettam, *Government and Society*, 17; Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 158.

⁴²⁷ Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L’Absolutisme Bourbonien*, 73–85.

⁴²⁸ Emmanuelli, 45. My translation.

⁴²⁹ Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 87; Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 158–9; Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L’Absolutisme Bourbonien*, 85–9.

⁴³⁰ Swann, “The State and Political Culture,” 148–9.

⁴³¹ Mettam, *Government and Society*, 16; Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L’Absolutisme Bourbonien*, 40–44.

⁴³² Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L’Absolutisme Bourbonien*, 47.

wrote that “it is too dangerous to entrust [financial tasks] to men from the same province, who would always have interests and desires which would run counter to the course of true justice.”⁴³³ All the same, the number of subofficials kept growing, as they were absolutely necessary in order for the intendant to perform his functions. By the end of the 18th century, over 700 subdelegates were employed by the now 33 intendants, in direct opposition to the express wishes of the king.⁴³⁴ These subdelegates were unpaid from the center, and were subsidized partly by unofficial payments from the intendant, and partly from their sometimes secondary role as (underpaid) royal officials.⁴³⁵

Even with the aid of subdelegates, it was hard for intendants to effect control in their provinces. Often the local notables and royal officials united their efforts against the intendant, who was perceived as a hostile stranger to local interests (as he in many cases was).⁴³⁶ Vincent Meyzie has described a revealing example of the problem of local control in a case in which a conflict erupted between a subdelegate and the urban elites of a provincial city. The subdelegate in question was employed by the intendant because he had no strong ties to the urban elites, in order to guarantee his loyalty to the intendant. But his lack of local ties served precisely to delegitimize his actions in the view of the locals, who succeeded in removing him from his post and hindering his actions.⁴³⁷

To conclude, it is hard to maintain the view of the intendants as the strong arm of bureaucratic absolutism. However, the problems connected with the institution of the intendancies were not due to the specific failings of the French state, but rather to fundamental limitations on effective state control in the pre-modern era. What the intendants did do was to establish a modicum of central oversight in the provinces in order to *limit* the patrimonial power of royal officials. They served as ‘free-floating officials’ who linked “a congeries of local ties to a variety of national ties.”⁴³⁸ To draw the parallels to the Qing state out, they constituted a centralized and universal ‘Level I’ bureaucracy to keep in check what more and more came

⁴³³ Mettam, *Government and Society*, 26–7.

⁴³⁴ Swann, “The State and Political Culture,” 148; Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 109.

⁴³⁵ Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France*, 54–5.

⁴³⁶ Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L’Absolutisme Bourbonien*, 36.

⁴³⁷ Meyzie, “Officiers ‘Moyens’ et Monarchie Absolue.”

⁴³⁸ Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France*, 99.

to resemble a local, particularistic and diffuse 'Level II' of royal officialdom.

Resource extraction

At all times, the top priority of the bureaucracy was to extract resources from the populace to fund the activities of the government, which mainly consisted in waging war. The circumstances of near-constant armed struggle experienced by the French state made the problem of resource extraction even more pointed. Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries the expenses related to war generally exceeded the revenues of the state, which resulted in a constant pressure to increase central revenue. For many scholars, the modernity of the French state hinges on the perceived success or failure of this endeavor, as when Alain Guéry writes: "The strong increase of royal finances in the sixteenth century is the measured sign of the definitive establishment of the modern state".⁴³⁹

That the French system of taxation should in any way reflect modernity is belied by just a perfunctory look at its positively byzantine organization. First of all, both the organization and the levels of taxation differed widely between *pays d'élection* and *pays d'états*. As consistent with the radiating structure of rule, the directly ruled *pays d'élection* lifted a far greater share of the tax burden than the indirectly ruled *pays d'états*.⁴⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Estates of the *pays d'états* had the official privilege of having to consent to taxation, and of taxing their territories themselves. Separate bureaucracies of taxation thus existed in these territories, and much taxation took the form of routinely paid "free gifts" to the king, a term designed to recognize their official semi-independence.⁴⁴¹

The 'core' tax was the *taille*, which in the previous centuries had provided most of the funds for the state. This was a regular tax on land paid by the lower classes, as the nobles were exempted from paying it. The *taille* was overseen by the provincial intendants, but actual collection was done by venal officials, who subsequently let parishes tax themselves, and in the process enriched themselves.⁴⁴² Over the 17th and 18th centuries, inflation

⁴³⁹ Guéry, "Les Finances de La Monarchie," 231, my translation.

⁴⁴⁰ Potter, *Corps and Clienteles*, 107–10.

⁴⁴¹ e.g. Le Goff and Sutherland, "The Revolution and the Rural Community in Eighteenth-Century Brittany," 98–9; Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France*, 95–6.

⁴⁴² Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 66–8.

slowly reduced the value of the *taille*, so several new direct taxes were introduced in order to bolster the state treasury.⁴⁴³ These were to be directly managed by the intendants, which in practice meant that they had to expand their unofficial sub-bureaucracies, and pay them by skimming off the taxes.⁴⁴⁴ This move to centralize taxation by way of the intendants shows the inherent dilemma of centralization. Tax collection simply had to be in the hands of local people, if it were to function at all. The move to bypass local officials in the collection of the new direct taxes simply resulted in the buildup of a parallel local tax bureaucracy outside the view of the state. In the eyes of the central state, this removed the corruption associated with local participation, but on the ground level it made little difference. As a case in point, intendants often chose to simply use the existing bureaucracy for collection of the new taxes as well as the *taille*, as that may have seemed an easier option.⁴⁴⁵

Over time, due to inflation the importance of direct taxation decreased, and the state came to rely increasingly on indirect taxation and various extraordinary revenues.⁴⁴⁶ Indirect taxation was through a variety of arrangements outsourced to great financiers, and passed through several layers of subcontractors, who all had to get a value for their investment, before reaching the populace. In an example given by Stephen Miller concerning the salt tax in Languedoc, the state received only about 20% of what should have been collected in the province, the rest presumably going to other parties or not being collected at all.⁴⁴⁷ The sale of offices, also an important part of state revenue, was outsourced in a similar fashion.

Yet, this lack of modern bureaucratic management should not induce us to disparage the French system of extraction as a failure in its pre-modern context. A tentative comparison with China easily serves to dispel this myth. As precise numbers are hard to trust in both cases, the comparison is necessarily quite rough, but it will serve the point in question. By 1755, the French annual state revenue totaled 253 million *livres tournois*, which translates to roughly 45 grams of silver per capita. In order to correct for price differences, we can convert that into wheat equivalents, which yields

⁴⁴³ Potter, *Corps and Clienteles*, 104–5.

⁴⁴⁴ Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France*, 54–5.

⁴⁴⁵ Kwass, 51–2.

⁴⁴⁶ Bonney, “Introduction,” 103; Collins, “State Building in Early-Modern Europe,” 626–7.

⁴⁴⁷ Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 69–72.

about 1,570 million kg, or roughly 63 kg wheat per capita.⁴⁴⁸ For the Qing state, annual revenue in 1753 stood at 73.8 million taels according to Wang, to which one must add very uncertain numbers for extraordinary revenue.⁴⁴⁹ If we take a rough guess of 90 million taels, that is equivalent to roughly 13 grams of silver per capita.⁴⁵⁰ In grain equivalents (here rice instead of wheat), that amounts to 3,750 million kg, or 15 kg per capita.⁴⁵¹ This means that from a population base of roughly a tenth of that of China, the French state managed to acquire nearly half of the total revenue commanded by the Qing, expressed in terms of grain equivalents.

What we see in France is a thus machinery of extraction stretched to its utmost to garner as many resources as possible in order to feed its bloated armies. My point here is thus not that the French state was not capable of drawing in large amounts of resources, but rather, that the method by which this was accomplished was far from by creating a modern state in any form.

The development of the extraction form over time further reinforces this point. In the *pays d'élection* the state often failed to get the stipulated amounts of taxes, and annual income was far from stable.⁴⁵² As a response, gradually the state ceded direct control over resource extraction to officials and corporate groups in society, as this seemed the only way to keep revenue levels stably high. By empowering local notables, the state augmented the resources available. In the 17th century, government income rose markedly, while in the 18th century the various initiatives taken by central government only managed to counter inflation, so that income in terms of grain remained fairly stable.⁴⁵³ The devolution of central power is especially evident in the *pays d'états*, where authority increasingly was swept into the hands of local power holders at the expense of the intendants. Increased local power was simply necessary to extract the required amount

⁴⁴⁸ Mathias and O'Brien, "Taxation in Britain and France, 1715-1810"; Guéry, "Les Finances de La Monarchie". A hectoliter of wheat is here estimated to weigh around 70 kg.

⁴⁴⁹ Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911*, 72.

⁴⁵⁰ I here follow Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence*, 97.

⁴⁵¹ Allen et al., "Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in China, 1738-1925," 16; Deng, "The Continuation and Efficiency" has roughly the same number.

⁴⁵² Potter, *Corps and Clienteles*, 104-7.

⁴⁵³ Guéry, "Les Finances de La Monarchie"; Bonney, "France, 1494-1815," 147; Mathias and O'Brien, "Taxation in Britain and France, 1715-1810."

of resources.⁴⁵⁴ In return for steady streams of revenue, an increasing proportion of taxes was retained by local power holders.⁴⁵⁵ As much as half of all revenue did not leave the province it was raised in, going instead to local office-holders and other notables.⁴⁵⁶

This localization of power restrained the freedom of central government by binding income to local groups. Furthermore, it created dangers of revolt and loss of royal authority in the provinces. This problem was explicitly recognized by Colbert, who at various points, unsuccessfully, tried to lower taxes to restore royal authority.⁴⁵⁷ The problem inherent in the whole situation is summed up by Mark Potter, “The long term political cost of this ‘coerced cooperation’, then, lay in the devolution of public power away from the crown to both individuals (office holders with strengthened property rights) and privileged corps, a devolution that would severely limit the crown’s financial options in the eighteenth century.”⁴⁵⁸

Military Power

Apart from resource extraction, warfare was by far the most important activity of the French state. In the 17th and 18th centuries, France was at war repeatedly, totaling something like half the entire period. Moreover, as was almost universally the case in pre-modern times, payment for war made up the overwhelming part of the state expenditure. At all times, the procurement of resources for waging war was the primary driver of state formation in France. Changes in the institutional structure of the state, such as the massive growth of venal officials, the establishment of the intendancies, and the creation of new taxes, always happened as a direct result of warfare, whether during a war, or afterward as attempts to secure repayment of the massive war debts taken by the regime.⁴⁵⁹ Changes were thus not enacted unless absolutely necessary, but the necessity of change was on the other hand an almost ever-present phenomenon.

This change is naturally most obvious in the immense expansion of the armed forces. 1445 saw the establishment of the first standing army in

⁴⁵⁴ Emmanuelli, *Un Mythe de L’Absolutisme Bourbonien*, 112; Mettam, *Government and Society*, 32; Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 84.

⁴⁵⁵ Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France*, 277.

⁴⁵⁶ Beik, 265.

⁴⁵⁷ Collins, *Fiscal Limits of Absolutism*, 209; Mettam, *Government and Society*, 118–21.

⁴⁵⁸ Potter, *Corps and Clienteles*, 98.

⁴⁵⁹ Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 158–9; Campbell, *Power and Politics*, 14.

France of around 14,000 men. A century later, the peacetime forces of France remained at a similar level, although at wartime this was expanded to around 50,000. By the middle of the 17th century, this was expanded to a peacetime force of more than 70,000, with wartime figures totaling 150,000. At the turn of the 17th century, this development climaxed with a peacetime force of about 150,000, and as much as 400,000 men during wartime. Throughout the 18th century, however, the numbers seem to have plateaued.⁴⁶⁰ As was the case in China, the notional strength of the French army did not correspond exactly to its realistic strength. Captains who were financially responsible for the upkeep of their regiments skimmed on the cost, and avoided keeping their regiments at full strength. However, the constant testing of the army in wartime tended to keep this problem to manageable levels, so that realistic numbers is thought to have fluctuated around 80-90% of the paper figures.⁴⁶¹

These numbers fit well with what we have seen for revenue, as we would reasonably expect since most of the state expenditure went to the army. It also fits well with the comparison to the Qing state above, with the French army reaching around a third of the size of the Qing army during the frequent wars. It is also telling that France, despite its comparatively small size, managed to mobilize between two and three times the absolute number of soldiers than the Qing did during its border wars. This underlies the marked difference in the nature of warfare between the two states, as the French wars were fought for the survival of the state, while the Qing frontier wars were strictly unnecessary prestige projects of the Chinese emperors.

The organization of the army was similarly influenced by the constant military pressure. The French state was forced to constantly balance the need for central control of the army with the need to retain its effectiveness in the field, a dilemma which we saw in the Chinese case to be resolved entirely in favor of the former. In many cases, effectiveness was also in France sacrificed in order to retain central control. The army was subjected to a “patchwork quilt of jurisdictions” of the many different types of military officers.⁴⁶² As the army administration, similarly to the civil bureaucracy, was subject to the venal system of the sale of offices, it was top-

⁴⁶⁰ See Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, chap. 2 for numbers. As numbers constantly fluctuated, only approximations are given here.

⁴⁶¹ Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army Under Louis XIV*, 171–2.

⁴⁶² Rowlands, 273.

heavy with officers, many of whom simply did not work.⁴⁶³ Although this impeded effectiveness, it served to spread authority wide in the army, provided extra resources for the state, and offered places of state-derived prestige to nobles.⁴⁶⁴ At the top level of the officer class, the army was controlled by commanders-in-chief, and these were carefully selected by the king with regard to their loyalty to the state. In many instances, the need to balance out the interests of various aristocratic families was prioritized over the abilities of the commanders.⁴⁶⁵ Moreover, commissions to lead armies were always issued in limited periods only, often rotating between different people over the seasons, which also limited effectiveness.⁴⁶⁶

In other cases, the French state was forced to give up central oversight in order to guarantee the effectiveness of the army. In general, the army was controlled by a decentralized system of regulation and inspection, rather than directly by the central state, a system that “left a great deal of authority outside of Paris.”⁴⁶⁷ Various attempts to increase central control over the commanders-in-chief met with hostility and disobedience from the officers, and were quickly given up as unworkable in practice.⁴⁶⁸ In order for the army to remain adequately funded, the central state tolerated various parts of the army acting at times as ‘states within a state’, performing government functions like taxation and administration separately from the civilian bureaucracy.⁴⁶⁹ Additionally, the recruitment and financial maintenance of the troops were delegated to the captains, who had to pay out of their personal accounts, often spending huge sums in the process. The dangers of such patrimonialism in the officer ranks were recognized by the central government, but there emerged no alternative ways of securing the revenue needed.⁴⁷⁰

After the catastrophic result of the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), from 1765 a series of army reforms were instituted to further increase the efficiency of army command, as the venal system was recognized to limit its military

⁴⁶³ Félix and Tallett, “The French Experience,” 158–9.

⁴⁶⁴ Blaufarb, “Noble Privilege and Absolutist State Building.”

⁴⁶⁵ Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army Under Louis XIV*, 340.

⁴⁶⁶ Rowlands, 269–70.

⁴⁶⁷ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, 598.

⁴⁶⁸ Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army Under Louis XIV*, 290.

⁴⁶⁹ Beik, “The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration,” 215.

⁴⁷⁰ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, chap. 7.

potential. The core of these reforms was to centralize the financial management of the armies, so that captains no longer financed their companies themselves. During the following decades, this was coupled with a reform limiting higher military offices to nobles with at least four generations of nobility behind them, or alternatively, a family history of military service. Whereas earlier scholarship has seen these reforms as driven by separate dynamics, the first as a part of a drive to modernize the army and the second as a part of an aristocratic reaction to this modernization, recent studies tend to understand it as different aspects of the same phenomenon.⁴⁷¹ The thought behind reform was to professionalize military command through a reinforcement of noble privilege, and the establishment of a caste of military officers in command. Rather than a path to modernization of the army, it was a reorganization of the place of elite participation and fiscal responsibility, with mixed results. Although the reforms might have increased military effectiveness, they placed a greater burden upon the already pressed state treasury, and risked alienating large groups of the elite.

Summary

The French state expanded greatly in the 17th and 18th centuries, both in terms of officials employed, resources mobilized and military power. Ideally, this growing power was centered on the increasingly imperial figure of the king, but in reality the state was riddled with local patrimonial seats of power. The expansion of the state was driven by the relentless pressure of war, and was marked by concessions to local powerholders in order to keep revenue flowing for the army. As the old bureaucracy became unreliable, a new layer of centralized administration was created to uphold central power, with some success. Throughout the period, the state thereby managed to maintain one of the largest military forces on the European continent, but at the cost of an inherent instability of the regime.

The Habsburg Empire – relocation and continuation

The Habsburg Empire has traditionally been kept somewhat outside of the debates on state formation in Europe. It has been either “brought in only as background material for the study of other European states or

⁴⁷¹ Blaufarb, “Noble Privilege and Absolutist State Building”; Bien, Smith, and Blaufarb, *Caste, Class and Profession in Old Regime France*.

general trends”⁴⁷², or else remained conspicuously absent in the comparative literature.⁴⁷³ The reasons for this are not hard to guess. In its form, the Habsburg Empire obviously defies idealized conceptions of what the ‘early modern state’ should look like, with its confusingly complex and differentiated structure and its lack of anything resembling ‘national’ coherence. Additionally, its lack of any direct modern descendant, other than the incomparably smaller Austrian state, has both served to split up scholarship in a number of languages and traditions coinciding with the modern nation-states inhabiting its territories, and introduced a strong element of teleological pessimism regarding its importance. Remaining outside the cone-shaped vision of modernocentric history, it has been neglected in the broader, theoretical history.

The uncertainty regarding where to situate the Habsburg Empire in the traditional framework of state formation is also evident in the nomenclature. In his widely influential book *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, Richard Evans described it as “a complex and subtly-balanced organism, not a ‘state’ but a mildly centripetal agglutination of bewilderingly heterogeneous elements.”⁴⁷⁴ To avoid the nomenclature of statehood, most scholars simply use the term ‘Habsburg Monarchy’. Others refer to it as an empire, as I do here. Uncertainty also pertains as to whether one can classify the Habsburg Empire as ‘absolutist’, drawing inspiration from scholarship on contemporary France. The use of the term quite explicitly derives from an attempt to include the Habsburg Empire in the history of European State Formation, in order to rectify its traditional position as ‘something different’.⁴⁷⁵ On the other hand, the criticisms leveled at the use of the concept of absolutism in a French context appear even more valid regarding the Habsburgs, and so others deride the notion of a Habsburg absolutism as “at best, questionable and ... potentially misleading.”⁴⁷⁶ Regarding the issue of modernity, opinions likewise vary. Some scholars see the Habsburg Empire as the very “antipode of the modern state”⁴⁷⁷, while others see its development in the 18th century as “The birth of the modern centralized state.”⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷² Mamatey, *Rise of the Habsburg Empire*, iii–iv.

⁴⁷³ e.g. in Bonney, *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe C. 1200–1815*.

⁴⁷⁴ Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 447.

⁴⁷⁵ See Mat’á and Winkelbauer, *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1620 bis 1740*.

⁴⁷⁶ Scott, “The Problem of Government,” 258.

⁴⁷⁷ Blanning, *Joseph II*, 17–8.

⁴⁷⁸ Ogris, “The Habsburg Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century.”

This dilemma results from the by now familiar problem of how to fit the Habsburg state into the modernocentric grand narrative. Including it in the story necessitates the use of teleological frameworks of modernization or the lack thereof. However, when we realize that this framework is unnecessary, and move to the bureaucratic-imperial framework, the Habsburg Empire fits much more comfortably.

Emperor and state

Unlike the kings of France, the Habsburg emperors were inheritors of a long imperial tradition. This tradition stemmed from their role, kept continuously in the Habsburg family since the 15th century, as Holy Roman emperors. The Holy Roman Empire had existed in various forms since the 9th century, but was claimed to have an even longer pedigree, as the direct successor to the Roman Empire. The imperial succession was conceptualized by the notion of a *translatio imperii*, in which imperial sovereignty was passed to worthy successors through time, until finally God had granted the divine right to rule to the Habsburgs.⁴⁷⁹ The Habsburgs additionally claimed to be the descendants of the Trojan hero Aeneas, a claim they shared with the ancient Romans, and specifically the Julian imperial family of ancient Rome.⁴⁸⁰ Their imperial sovereignty ideally covered the whole world, as expressed by the repeated inscription ‘AEIOU’ - *Austriae est imperare orbi universo*, Austria is to rule the whole world.⁴⁸¹

At the end of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Habsburgs saw their powers as Holy Roman Emperors somewhat limited. Their status as emperors, however, was confirmed, and the imperial ideology was increasingly emanating from the by now permanent and expanding court in Vienna. The emperors around the turn of the 17th century were presented as ‘the Austrian sun’, sustaining the world with their piety, and their court presented as the center of the world.⁴⁸² The movement of the center of imperial ideology to Vienna and the Habsburgs’ hereditary lands, as opposed to the Holy Roman Empire was a gradual process, driven by the continuous expansion of Habsburg territory outside the empire, as well as developments within it. The temporary loss of the imperial

⁴⁷⁹ Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*, 430.

⁴⁸⁰ Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas*.

⁴⁸¹ Ducreux, “Emperors, Kingdoms, Territories,” 283; Beller, *A Concise History of Austria*, chap. 2.

⁴⁸² Schumann, *Die andere Sonne*; Golubeva, *The Glorification of Emperor Leopold I*; Mout, “Introduction,” 84–8; Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 173–7.

title in 1740-45 furthered the ideological relocation, as did the subsequent decades where imperial dignity was held by first the husband and then the son of the true ruler, Maria Theresia. When Joseph II at the end of the 18th century performed his emperorship, it was clearly centered on the hereditary lands, even to the point that he contented himself with the imperial title alone, remaining uncrowned in his separate realms.⁴⁸³

The relocation of the imperial center was coupled with the development of the imperial form of rule in the hereditary lands. From being seen as a disparate collection of separate territories, the hereditary lands from around 1700 began to be conceptualized as the ‘Austrian Monarchy’, with its unity and indivisibility being declared in the document known as the ‘Pragmatic Sanction’ from the early 18th century.⁴⁸⁴ In these lands, the monarchs were presented in an increasingly absolutist fashion, asserting imperial sovereignty at the expense of the local powerholders in the church and the Estates, although, as we will see, the latter kept being central to actual governance. The universal aspects of absolute rule was stressed, with the emperor (or empress) acting in obedience with natural law, and thereby guaranteeing the happiness of the state and the common people, especially represented by the peasantry.⁴⁸⁵

In parallel with the French case, it is of interest to note that also the Habsburgs were indirectly influenced by the Chinese model of empire through idealized philosophical writings on China. Although the precise degree of influence is unclear, a number of influential people at the Viennese court did write of the Chinese state as a model to be imitated, and their image of China had a degree of resemblance to the ideals of Joseph II.⁴⁸⁶ As with the French monarchs, a notable instance of this influence was to be seen in his parallel appropriation of the Chinese ritual of the ‘tilling of the soils’ (see fig. 14).

⁴⁸³ Evans, “Communicating Empire,” 121–2.

⁴⁸⁴ Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*, 159; Evans, “Communicating Empire,” 120–1.

⁴⁸⁵ Ingraio, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1618-1815*, 181; Jacobsen, “Limits to Despotism,” 378–83.

⁴⁸⁶ Jacobsen, “Limits to Despotism”; Demel, “China in the Political Thought of Western and Central Europe,” 58–9.



Fig. 14: Joseph II Tilling the Soils

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Differentiation of rule

The hotchpotch of separate territories ruled by the Habsburg emperors can make the Habsburg Empire seem as an ideal case of the composite state. The Habsburgs acted as emperors in the Holy Roman Empire, archdukes of Austria, King of Bohemia and Hungary, and the list could go on. Each territory was governed through local Estates, according to its own laws. Or at least, such was the ideal case seen from the perspective of the Estates.

In reality, over time the monarchy moved from resembling Evans' "mildly centripetal agglutination of bewilderingly heterogeneous elements" toward a more concentric pattern of rule. To impose unified rule over all its territories was impracticable, but some form of territorial consolidation was possible to achieve. A first step was the permanent establishment of the imperial court in Vienna, as noted above. This meant the establishment of a center of rule around which to order the monarchy's territories (see fig. 15).⁴⁸⁷ During various periods of reform, most markedly during the reign of Maria Theresia (1740-80), the Austrian and Bohemian lands were developed into the empire's core territory, subjected to firmer, bureaucratic

⁴⁸⁷ Mout, "Introduction," 87; Duindam, "The Habsburg Court in Vienna."

and autocratic control.⁴⁸⁸ Local Estates continued to exist, but came to function more as a tool of the central government than as an autonomous seat of political power. In Hungary the Estates had more power, and the Habsburgs ruled either through them, or through other groups of local notables.⁴⁸⁹ The Habsburgs' territories in Italy and the Netherlands, though substantial, were to a great degree left to be ruled by the local elites, who also retained most of the locally levied taxes. In the outermost circle were the various territories of the Holy Roman Empire. Habsburg overlordship here was mostly symbolic, contributing more to Habsburg prestige than actual power. Additionally, along the southern borders of the kingdom of Hungary a special military frontier zone existed, where the local populations supplied recruits for the army in exchange for tax exemptions and a degree of local autonomy.⁴⁹⁰



Fig. 15: The Habsburg Empire under Charles VI (1711-40)

Source: Charles Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy*, 109

In order to relate to the different territories of the monarchy, the Habsburg rulers projected a set of different images and roles, what Schumann calls “multiplying image cultivation”, but which we could equate with Crossley’s “simultaneity” presented above.⁴⁹¹ For example, when acting as

⁴⁸⁸ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 287 and *passim*.

⁴⁸⁹ Szakály, “Managing a Composite Monarchy.”

⁴⁹⁰ Hochedlinger, *Austria’s Wars of Emergence*, 83–91, 318–29.

⁴⁹¹ Schumann, *Die andere Sonne*.

Holy Roman Emperor, the entire court shifted around the ruler, to portray his status and function in that regard.⁴⁹² However, while these multiple images remained important, over time the single image of the ruler as emperor of the Austrian Monarchy became comparatively more stressed.

Bureaucracy

The development of a bureaucracy in the Habsburg Empire is central to its perceived development into a modern state. This narrative of modernization is generally focused on the form taken by the bureaucracy during and after the reform era under Maria Theresia (1740-80) and Joseph II (1780-90). A great deal of bureaucratization and centralization of administration did take place in this era, but the Habsburg bureaucracy remained somewhat chaotic and ultimately dependent on local powerholders.

The administration of the Habsburg Empire was extremely differentiated across its lands, and any attempt at presenting a unified picture will have to gloss over countless exceptions to the general pattern. Broadly speaking, however, it can be described as a two-layered structure, similar to what we have seen above.⁴⁹³ The first layer of central government was primarily located in Vienna, and otherwise very sparingly spread out in the provinces. Below them, a second layer of local administration in each of the separate lands was in the hands of local powerholders represented in the numerous provincial Estates.

The upper level of administration was, even in the 17th century, quite centralized and bureaucratically organized, and became even more so after the 18th century reforms. Officials were recruited on a somewhat meritocratic basis of experience, and periodically rotated between offices.⁴⁹⁴ At the end of the 18th century, a very tight system of control with the central officials was put in place, as well as strict criteria for their education.⁴⁹⁵

At the local level, as always, we see a different story. Until 1748, central government had no control over local administration, which was placed squarely in the hands of the provincial Estates.⁴⁹⁶ The Estates, manned by

⁴⁹² Duindam, "The Habsburg Court in Vienna."

⁴⁹³ Hochedlinger, "The Habsburg Monarchy," 69.

⁴⁹⁴ Dickson, "Monarchy and Bureaucracy," 337; Vushko, "Bureaucracy, Enlightenment, and Habsburg Central Europe," 796.

⁴⁹⁵ Heindl, "Bureaucracy, Officials, and the State in the Austrian Monarchy."

⁴⁹⁶ Bérenger, "The Austrian Lands," 165.

hereditary local powerholders, were the agents of taxation, provided recruits and supply for the armies, funded infrastructure, and coordinated everything else to do with local government.⁴⁹⁷ Below the Estates, the landlords who dominated the agricultural sector comprised the lowest level of ‘government’, in the sense that they were responsible for enacting the decisions taken by the Estates, though they remained essentially private agents. The agents of central government sent out to the provinces were greatly outnumbered by the officials of the Estates and lordships, which had a relatively large and autonomous administration of their own.⁴⁹⁸ In addition, the centrally controlled officials in the provinces were as a rule very badly paid, which naturally resulted in them securing income by unofficial means, what we today would call corruption.⁴⁹⁹ In a general statement, H. M. Scott summarized the situation as the “magnates ruled in the name of the Habsburgs and implemented – or circumvented – the orders received from far-away Vienna”.⁵⁰⁰

The mid-18th century reforms changed this picture somewhat for the central realms of Austria and Bohemia. The number of central officials greatly increased (from about 6,000 to 11,000), the power of the Estates was reduced, and central officials were put in control of taxation and the army.⁵⁰¹ However, the power of local elites remained strong. The people holding the reins of power in local society remained the same as before the reforms, though some gained new government titles.⁵⁰² Then, after the disastrous result of the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), the monarchy’s dire financial situation forced the central state to rely strongly on the still functional Estates for their ability to forward resources, and the Estates thus saw their local power increase again.⁵⁰³ Faced by financial pressure, the central government was simply forced to delegate power to local elites, as they remained the only way to get access to the resources of the population.

⁴⁹⁷ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 297; Hochedlinger, *Austria’s Wars of Emergence*, 26–7.

⁴⁹⁸ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 307–8.

⁴⁹⁹ Heindl, “Bureaucracy, Officials, and the State in the Austrian Monarchy,” 39–40; Vushko, “Bureaucracy, Enlightenment, and Habsburg Central Europe,” 799–801.

⁵⁰⁰ Scott, “Reform in the Habsburg Monarchy,” 153; cf. Bérenger, “The Austrian Lands,” 174.

⁵⁰¹ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 264, 306–8; Scott, “The Problem of Government,” 254–5.

⁵⁰² Evans, “The Habsburg Monarchy and Bohemia, 1526–1848,” 147; Scott, “The Problem of Government,” 260.

⁵⁰³ Godsey, *The Sinews of Habsburg Power*; Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 329.

The dilemma between central bureaucratic control and local effectiveness in the Habsburg context is amply illustrated by the case of Galicia, as brought forth by Iryna Vushko.⁵⁰⁴ When Galicia, a formerly Polish territory, was annexed by the Habsburgs in 1772, the central government had plans to rule it in a strictly bureaucratic manner. To ensure central control, local powerholders were excluded from the provincial administration, as their personal ties to the region were perceived as a source of unreliability. The result of this was an inevitable collapse of administrative efficiency in the region, and the eventual incorporation of local elites into the bureaucratic structure, disregarding their lack of official qualifications. The necessity to secure resources from the region hence made the central authorities give up their insistence on a centralized bureaucracy.

The bureaucratic reforms of the mid- and late 18th century resulted in a “new upper layer of central government”, but this remained a “very thin princely cover on top of an essentially estate-based apparatus.”⁵⁰⁵ Central control over the bureaucracy was somewhat strengthened, but local government remained firmly in the hands of local elites.

Resource extraction

We now move to the issue of resource extraction in the Habsburg Empire, the central task of the imperial bureaucracy. The importance of finances to the bureaucratic administration is illustrated by the fact that more than 80% of all officials of the central government were financial in nature.⁵⁰⁶ During the 17th and 18th centuries, continuous warfare forced the state to attempt to expand its revenue to pay for its growing armies. This was to a large degree successfully accomplished through reliance on traditional methods of extraction.

The core of resource extraction in the Habsburg Empire was from the 17th century the *contribution*, a direct tax on land imposed to secure funds for the army. This tax had its origins in extraordinary wartime grants from the Estates, but in the 17th century developed into a permanent source of revenue.⁵⁰⁷ The contribution was levied from the Empire’s central lands, Austria and Bohemia, as well as from Hungary, which nevertheless paid less

⁵⁰⁴ Vushko, “Bureaucracy, Enlightenment, and Habsburg Central Europe.”

⁵⁰⁵ Scott, “The Problem of Government,” 259; Hochedlinger, “The Habsburg Monarchy,” 69.

⁵⁰⁶ Dickson, “Monarchy and Bureaucracy,” 337–41.

⁵⁰⁷ Pieper, “Financing an Empire,” 170–1.

per capita than the central lands, consistent with the general ‘concentric’ structure of rule.⁵⁰⁸ In the imperial treasury, the contribution accounted for between 40 and 60% of revenue, the rest being made up for mostly by indirect taxes, most notably the salt tax which contributed 10-18%.⁵⁰⁹ The Habsburgs’ lands in Italy and the Netherlands also sent some taxes to Vienna, but these were quite small sums compared to the wealth and population of the territories.⁵¹⁰ On top of this came the revenues from the Holy Roman Empire, which had not, contrary to the general impression one gets from scholarship, yet become totally defunct. Its support came largely through a number of extraordinary tax grants in times of war, as a sort of tribute, which were certainly important for the government, but remained a minor source of income compared to the income from the hereditary lands.⁵¹¹

In levying the contribution, the central government relied on the Estates, which subsequently relied on local secular and ecclesiastical lords to do the actual collection.⁵¹² Direct taxation was thus until the mid-18th century completely out of the hands of the central government. The dominical property of the lords was either exempt from taxation or taxed at preferential rates, and with the lords themselves in charge of collection, direct taxation was in practice mostly borne by the peasantry. An effort to increase taxation of lordly property was begun under Joseph II, but ultimately failed.⁵¹³ In the 1740’s a measure of central oversight and control of the contribution was imposed in the Austrian and Bohemian lands, but the Estates retained a large role in financial affairs and the lords remained in charge of collection. The relentless need to increase revenue, due to near-constant warfare, made the central government still more dependent on the financial services of the Estates, which consequently retained a large degree of fiscal power throughout the 18th century.⁵¹⁴ Even by the 1780’s, after decades of efforts to centralize taxation, only 74% of revenue

⁵⁰⁸ Szakály, “Managing a Composite Monarchy,” 212.

⁵⁰⁹ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. II, 382-3; Pieper, “Financing an Empire,” 176–8.

⁵¹⁰ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. II, 102-4, 142-6.

⁵¹¹ Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*, 445; Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. II, 141.

⁵¹² Béranger, “The Austrian Lands,” 165.

⁵¹³ Pieper, “Financing an Empire,” 170.

⁵¹⁴ Godsey, “Habsburg Government and Intermediary Authority”; Godsey, *The Sinews of Habsburg Power*.

ever reached the central treasury – somewhat more than in France, but still less than in China.⁵¹⁵

One of the notable successes of the Habsburgs in the 17th and 18th century was the great expansion of total revenue received by the central government. In absolute numbers, annual revenue increased from 5 million guilders in 1650, through 20 million in 1700, reaching 90 million by 1790.⁵¹⁶ One of the main reasons for this was the continuous expansion of territories through the period, as well as general population growth, and of course inflation. If we very roughly ‘correct’ for this by converting to wheat equivalents per capita, we get a development from ca. 27 kg in 1650, through 45 kg in 1700, reaching 70 kg by 1790 – still an impressive increase, though far from the 18-fold expansion noted above.⁵¹⁷ By the end of the century, central annual revenue was equivalent to around 1,500 million kilos of wheat. In these numbers, the Habsburg Empire is roughly comparable to France, and therefore also extracted roughly five times the amount of resources per capita as the Qing state.

Military Power

The military aspect of the Habsburg state in the 17th and 18th centuries has been a somewhat neglected area of scholarship, as romantic visions of an empire preferring diplomacy and marriage contracts to war has tended to shroud the importance of military power for the regime.⁵¹⁸ However, war plays a central part in the history of the late pre-modern Habsburg state. Not only was the Habsburg Empire at war for most of the time here considered, war also in every case provided the impetus for reform of the various branches of the state, and is thus a defining factor in Habsburg state formation.

As should be expected, by far the largest item of expense of the Habsburg Empire was its army. Though fluctuating across times of war and peace, army expenses remained consistently high. Throughout the 18th century, in peacetime the army consumed around 50% of total expenditure, with a

⁵¹⁵ Dickson, “Count Karl von Zinzendorf’s ‘New Accountancy,’” 27–8.

⁵¹⁶ Pieper, “Financing an Empire,” 174–5; Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. II, 382–3; Bérenger, *Finances et absolutisme*.

⁵¹⁷ All numbers are very uncertain, so this is a very rough estimate. Grain prices are cited from Zanden, “Wages and the Standard of Living in Europe, 1500–1800,” 184. For population numbers, see chapter 2.

⁵¹⁸ Hochedlinger, “‘Bella Gerant Alii ...?’”

further 30% going toward repaying the debts incurred in the wars. In war-time, the military share of the budget could reach up to 90%.⁵¹⁹

Through the 17th and 18th centuries, the Habsburg army went through a long period of continual change. This change is most obvious regarding its size. After the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first standing army of the Habsburg Empire was created, comprising 25,000 men.⁵²⁰ By 1700 it had expanded to 100,000, and by the 1730's reached 200,000 in wartime, to be reduced to 160,000 when peace arrived. By the late 18th century, it had expanded to more than 300,000.⁵²¹ It should be remembered, though, that these numbers reflect the paper strength of the army, with its effective strength normally reduced by about 20-30%.⁵²²

Two separate contingents of soldiers should be added to these numbers. The first is the contingent of border forces maintained in the militarized zones at the southern borders of the empire. Though they at all times constituted a substantial force, the Border Forces also expanded over the period, reaching around 70,000 by the late 18th century. The second is the often ignored military contribution of the Holy Roman Empire, provided by the Imperial Estates. In wars which were declared as Imperial Wars, these provided substantial contingents of troops to the Habsburg emperors, as many as 130,000 during the War of the Spanish Succession.⁵²³ However, help from the Imperial Estates was less dependable as a source of security than that provided by the Habsburgs' own forces, and moreover the size of the Imperial army contingents stagnated through the 18th century, leading to a loss in its relative importance to the Habsburgs' military efforts.

The expansion of the Habsburg army thus paralleled the French experience, reaching comparable levels, although with a marked delay. Following what we found in the case of resource extraction, the largest expansion in France happened in the 17th century, while for the Habsburg Empire the 18th century saw the most change. The comparability with France also means that a comparison with the Qing reveals the same pattern of divergence observed above. Based on a tenth of the population, the Habsburg

⁵¹⁹ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. II, 385-6; Pieper, "Financing an Empire," 185-6.

⁵²⁰ Rothenberg, "The Shield of the Dynasty," 171.

⁵²¹ Hochedlinger, *Austria's Wars of Emergence*, 104, 300; Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. II, 343-57.

⁵²² Hochedlinger, *Austria's Wars of Emergence*, 235-6.

⁵²³ Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*, 454-62.

Empire mobilized an army around a third to half the size of the Qing army. This testifies to the immense degree of militarization of Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries.

The organization of the Habsburg army was characterized by a large degree of decentralization. In each of the Habsburg territories, the Estates were responsible for the recruitment, supply and lodgings of troops.⁵²⁴ The regiments themselves were semi-privatized, with the position of regimental officer for specific regiments for sale, the buyer assuming private responsibility of maintaining his regiment.⁵²⁵ Even the supply of provisions and transport for the army was often outsourced to private contractors, with predictably bad results for their quality.⁵²⁶ As mentioned, a respectable part of the Habsburg army was made up of the Border Forces, controlled by the Inner Austrian Estates together with local powerholders. These were organized differently from the rest of the army, based on local family structures, and existed ostensibly for the defense against the Turkish threat, but always with the parallel function of securing Hungary against rebellion.⁵²⁷

Holding all this together was the central officer corps under the command of the Aulic War Council. Following the 'Thirty Years' War, where the powerful commander Wallenstein was perceived to be threatening the regime, the Habsburgs kept close control over the high command. The position of Commander-in-Chief was cast only upon trusted figures, or kept within the royal family - with dynastic considerations sometimes outweighing the question of experience.⁵²⁸ Moreover, high offices were peopled by men from outside the Habsburg dynastic realms, in an effort to secure their lack of local attachment.⁵²⁹

As happened with the rest of the state apparatus, from the 1740's military administration was subjected to a series of reforms. Again, these were limited to the central lands of Austria and Bohemia, though with the addition of the strategically important southern Military Border. Here, the administration of army recruitment, supply and lodging were centralized, and conscription expanded in order to secure more recruits for the army. A

⁵²⁴ Hochedlinger, "The Habsburg Monarchy," 78–9.

⁵²⁵ Hochedlinger, 78; Hochedlinger, *Austria's Wars of Emergence*, 111, 116.

⁵²⁶ Hochedlinger, "The Habsburg Monarchy," 84.

⁵²⁷ Rothenberg, "The Shield of the Dynasty," 171.

⁵²⁸ Rothenberg, 176; Hochedlinger, *Austria's Wars of Emergence*, 112.

⁵²⁹ Hochedlinger, "The Habsburg Monarchy," 92–3.

reorganization of officer recruitment and education also took place, with the effect of instituting a new elite group of ennobled, educated and militarized lower officers.⁵³⁰ The reforms succeeded in centralizing control of important parts of army maintenance, while other parts were left decentralized.

Summary

Over the 16th and 17th centuries, the Habsburg Empire changed under pressure of war from being a disparate collection of territories and titles held together only by the person of the ruler, into resembling a more typical bureaucratic empire. Rule coagulated around a central court, with newly defined core territories increasingly subject to bureaucratic administration. A standing army was established under central control, and expanded greatly through especially the 18th century. Resource extraction was simultaneously intensified to pay for it. Even though the central bureaucracy was strengthened, and the scope of state power much expanded, rule remained based on local powerholders throughout the state, at the ground level through lords, or through regional Estates, with the upper bureaucracy consigned to a function of inspection and oversight.

Conclusion

What are we to make of this comparison between the central states of Qing China, France and the Habsburg Empire? The first conclusion to draw is that broad, generalized notions of Europe being ruled by modern states, as opposed to a traditional state in China, do not offer much insight on state formation in the 17th and 18th centuries. When we look at specific aspects of the state, such as tax structure or bureaucratic structure, no clear uniform divide between East and West is obvious. In some cases, the divide is completely incongruent with traditional expectations – for example, in the recruitment of officials, China and the Habsburg Empire seem to have developed fairly meritocratic practices, whereas France practiced a venal system. Should we conclude that in this respect, the Chinese state was more modern than the French? This would, in my opinion, be absurd, and so should it seem when claims of modernity are liberally cast about regarding developments in the European states. Instead of applying broad

⁵³⁰ Hochedlinger, “Mars Ennobled,” 172. See also chapter 5 of this thesis.

categories of modernity and tradition to states in this period, we must analyze specific questions of converging and diverging developments, and relate them to concrete dynamics of pre-modern state formation.⁵³¹

Absolutism and the bureaucratic-imperial model

The debates regarding the applicability of the concept of absolutism in Europe are the result of the unfortunate modernocentric implications of the term. The notion of an all-powerful ruler capable of ruling alone without recourse to local elites is a fiction in a pre-modern context, and rightly deserves to be criticized and ultimately abandoned. But the uncertainty as to how we can then characterize the states that developed in Europe in late pre-modernity has resulted in a number of typologies which seem not to be very fruitful. The 'Dynastic State' suggested by Rowlands seems not to capture the growing permanence of state institutions as distinct from the ruling family that developed precisely in this period, and the 'Baroque State' suggested by Campbell seems a bit too narrow and provincial.⁵³²

What we see in this period, I suggest, is the appropriation or development of the bureaucratic-imperial model of rule in France and the Habsburg Empire, which therefore represents a degree of convergence between these and China. The bureaucratic-imperial model developed here incorporates most of what we understand of absolutism, but without its modernocentric problems, and at the same time incorporates newer revisions to the picture. An outline of the model could be presented as follows: (1) the ruler is theoretically granted absolute power, but is simultaneously confined by expectations of conformity with fundamental laws, not in the sense of a constitution, but by his role as part of the cosmic order. (2) Rule is structured in a series of concentric rings around the court as a permanent center of power, with decreasing central control further from the center. (3) The core areas of the state are ruled by a somewhat abstract bureaucracy, while governance in more peripheral areas is delegated to semi-autonomous local elites. (4) Income derives from taxation of primarily landed wealth. (5) Military power is projected by a standing army under bureaucratic control from the center.

Seeing the states that developed in continental Europe in late pre-modernity as instances of bureaucratic empires serves to conceptually unite Eurasian history of state formation. One could say that Europe's position of

⁵³¹ Cf. Wong, *China Transformed*, 1997, chap. 4.

⁵³² Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army Under Louis XIV*; Campbell, *Power and Politics*.

uniqueness is moved back in history to the middle ages, with its extreme diffusion of sovereignty among Church, Emperor, princes and lords. In late pre-modernity, this special position was gradually eroded by the establishment of bureaucratic-imperial states, and the locus of sovereignty was slowly unified in the rulers of these states.⁵³³ In this, they came to resemble other Eurasian bureaucratic empires, among them Qing China.

The appropriateness of using the Chinese imperial system as a model for France and the Habsburg Empire is supported by the inspiration of Chinese models of rule to contemporary state thinkers connected to the regimes. This is not to argue that the direct influence of the Chinese example was crucial to this development. Far from it, idealizations of the Chinese state was used to provide input to essentially European discussions of state power, and their influence remained limited. But the mere fact that the Chinese model could be thought of as an inspiration for European rulers, and this by many influential thinkers, shows that the imperial model was eminently present in the European context.

The fiscal-military state

Concomitant with this convergence on the bureaucratic-imperial state form, we can observe a clear divergence between the European states and the Qing state is in the scope of military mobilization, and the related intensification of resource extraction to fund it. After a drastic period of intensification in the 17th century in the case of France, and the 18th century in the case of the Habsburg Empire, both these states attained a degree of resource extraction nearing five times the amount of grain equivalents per capita as that of the Qing state. This development was closely coupled with a spectacular growth in army sizes in France and the Habsburg Empire, where the number of soldiers similarly reached levels per capita roughly five times greater than in the Qing.

These quite extreme levels of resource extraction and military mobilization attained by France and the Habsburg Empire has rightly been recognized as one of the most central developments of the European state in late pre-modernity. In recent years, this has been discussed under the framework of the ‘fiscal-’ or ‘fiscal-military state’.⁵³⁴ Although the term ‘fiscal-military

⁵³³ Cf. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*; See also Eich, Schmidt-Hofner, and Wieland, *Der Wiederkehrende Leviathan* for the similarities between bureaucratic government in late antiquity and late pre-modern Europe.

⁵³⁴ Bonney, *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe C. 1200–1815*; Storrs, *The Fiscal-Military State in Eighteenth-Century Europe*; Yun-Casalilla and O’Brien, *The Rise of Fiscal States*.

state' itself carries no implications of modernity, referring only to the ability of a state to tax its population and fight wars on a large scale, it has come to be "regarded by many as the key to comprehending the transition from old regime to modernity."⁵³⁵ In this interpretation, the constant military competition between European states forced them to continually improve their capacities, which gradually led them to develop modern bureaucracies.

Our comparison reveals at least two problems with this view. Firstly, the bureaucracies developed in France and the Habsburg Empire to extract resources appear very far from being modern in any sense. They were enormously dependent on local powerholders, chaotically organized, semi-patrimonial, and differentiated across the states' territories. In many cases, augmentation of resource extraction was coupled with devolution of central power rather than the opposite. And secondly, we do find something structurally resembling a long-standing fiscal-military state in China, even if operating at a markedly reduced level of intensity compared to Europe.⁵³⁶

More broadly, the basic characteristics of the fiscal-military state, a state that taxes its population in order to feed its armies, seems to fit many states in history, especially imperial states. Again, the militarily feeble domain states of medieval Europe are the great outliers here. What is distinctive about late pre-modern European states is a question of quantity, not quality. Resource extraction and military mobilization were in 17th- and 18th-century Europe driven to levels of intensity not seen before, but only through an intensification of essentially pre-modern practices. The theory of modernization by militarization has yet to answer at what point quantitative change turns qualitative, and by which mechanisms.

Stability and state dynamics

Seeing the developments in France and the Habsburg Empire through the lens of the Qing state suggests a different perspective. First we must repeat that the central 'goal' of the pre-modern state is stability. Stability is generally what guarantees a regime's survival, not modernization or change. Coming back to the analogy with evolution in the biological realm, evolutionary success is governed by the general law of "survival of the stable",

⁵³⁵ Félix and Tallett, "The French Experience," 147.

⁵³⁶ See Deng, "The Continuation and Efficiency"; Wong, "Taxation and Good Governance."

rather than “survival of the fittest”.⁵³⁷ The evolutionary analogy is apt, as pre-modern states are not as ‘designed’ as they seem – the pattern of satisficing behavior that characterizes government means that it is primarily the local environment of a state that is important for its form.

The stability of a state is threatened by internal forces – local powerholders seeking to undermine the state, split it up, or replace who holds power – as well as by external forces – other states who seek to conquer it. There exists a real tradeoff in the solution to these problems: internal security requires the diffusion of power away from any centers of control apart from the ruler, and necessitates as little an imposition of the state on local society as possible, in order to avoid popular and elite discontent. External security requires the opposite – the creation of effective armies which act as secondary centers of power as well as large impositions of the state in order to garner the resources needed to feed them. Moreover, a larger local presence of the state requires compromise with local powerholders, who thereby compromise central control.

The Qing state, as the uncontested superpower of its region, is an example of a state strongly privileging internal security over external security, as no real external threats emerged before the 19th century. In contrast, France and the Habsburg Empire existed in a constant state of military competition. As both states built up their capacities to meet external threats, they at every turn encountered problems with internal stability, and were repeatedly forced to make concessions to secondary powerholders. The price the French and Habsburg rulers paid for increased military capacity was constant negotiation and an inherent instability of the regimes.

Could this dynamic of militarization and increased state capacity continue indefinitely? Not without the technologies of modernity. The French state by the 18th century seems to have hit some kind of ceiling in its capacity for resource extraction and military mobilization. When the Habsburg Empire by the late 18th century finally attained the same level of militarization as France, attempts at further reform quickly ended in failure. This could suggest that both states were near the far end of the spectrum of militarization possible with pre-industrial means. Any movement beyond this would have disastrous results for the stability of the system, as it in

⁵³⁷ Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 15.

fact did during the following revolutionary era, where the unification of Europe was nearly achieved.

This insight has consequences for how we understand the European dynamic of state formation in late pre-modernity. As an inherently unstable dynamic, it could continue only up to a point without collapsing. Tilly has noted how interstate competition reduced the number of European polities from thousands to tens over the course of the centuries.⁵³⁸ If continued further, this number would be brought sufficiently low to make internal security a more pressing problem, which then would result in de-militarization and reduction of the scope of the state. This was in fact what happened in China at the end of the period of the Warring States (475-221 BC), when the multistate system collapsed into an empire.

The presence of such a dynamic of interstate competition in late pre-modern Europe was unusual, but it was not unique to world history. At various points in time we can observe similar dynamics of interstate competition leading to the buildup of fiscal-military states. Apart from in Warring States China, these dynamics have been observed in the period leading up to the establishment of the Roman Empire, and again in the late Roman Empire, in Southern Song China, and undoubtedly could be found in many other times and places.⁵³⁹ In all these cases, the dynamic eventually collapsed, and in none of them did it result in the formation of modern states.

In reality, the multistate system in Europe did of course not collapse, although it came close to during the Napoleonic Wars. In the 19th century, the flurry of technologies associated with modernity came into use, drastically altering the dynamics of state power. What I would argue is that the temporal conjunction in Europe of the fiscal-military dynamic with the breakthrough of modernity does not necessarily imply a causal relationship between the two. The fiscal-military dynamic did not in any direct manner bring forth the technological and scientific breakthroughs of the industrial revolution.⁵⁴⁰ It brought significant change, but not modernization. It was, in short, a dynamic which can be contained within a pre-modern framework of state formation.

⁵³⁸ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*, 38–45.

⁵³⁹ Hui, *State Formation*; Bang, “The Roman Empire II: The Monarchy”; Eich, *Zur Metamorphose des politischen Systems*; Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

⁵⁴⁰ Cf. McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity*.

Traditional Elites

Die vernünftigste und weiseste Staatsverfassung auf unsrer ganzen Kugel, wovor ich die Sinesische ohne Bedenken erkläre, weiß von keinen erblichen Adel.

The most reasonable and wise constitution on our globe, which I unhesitatingly declare the Chinese to be, does not know a hereditary nobility.

- Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi, *Vergleichungen*, 1762

Through most of the recent century and a half, a fairly negative view of the traditional landed elites in 17th- and 18th-century Europe and China has prevailed. In the dominant modernocentric narratives, whether Whig or Marxist, the old elites were poised as obstacles to modernity, destined to give way to the modern bourgeoisie. Their association with tradition ensured that a number of negative characteristics were ascribed to them: conservative, unproductive rentiers, stuck in an unhelpful worldview oblivious to the changes of the world.

In Europe, interpreted through a framework of gradual modernization, the nobility was seen as in decline, becoming increasingly irrelevant to a society dominated by the twin engines of modernization, the capitalist economic system and the leviathan of the modern state.⁵⁴¹ Particularly associated with this view is Norbert Elias, who in *The Court Society* described the French nobility as trapped in the ‘gilded cage’ of Versailles, removed from the exercise of power.⁵⁴² In China, conversely, the lack of modernization was often attributed to the continued dominance of the traditional elites, the gentry. This view was prevalent already from the time of Weber, who attributed China’s stagnation to its lack of a bourgeoisie and the continuous rule of an unchanged traditional elite.⁵⁴³ This picture conforms to the pattern we have observed in the previous chapters. Tradition is equated with stagnation and lack of change, and development is equated with modernization.

⁵⁴¹ cf. Scott, “The Early Modern European Nobility”; Scott, “Dynastic Monarchy”; Scott and Storrs, “The Consolidation of Noble Power,” 2.

⁵⁴² Elias, *The Court Society*; For a critique of Elias, see Duindam, *Myths of Power*.

⁵⁴³ Esherick and Rankin, “Introduction,” 1–3.

Fortunately, since the 1970's the European nobility has been the object of renewed interest, which has resulted in a strong revisionist critique of their traditional image. It is now broadly accepted that the European nobility retained its influence and power throughout late pre-modernity and even well into the 19th century.⁵⁴⁴ As we have already noted in the previous chapter, it is now recognized that the absolutist states emerged through cooperation with the old elites, rather than supplanting them.⁵⁴⁵ Also in the economic sphere it is now noted that the nobility remained powerful, both by their continued dominance of landed wealth and by increasing economic relations with the state and the markets.⁵⁴⁶

The persistence of traditional elites in Europe was thus at least partly the result of their changing with the times. This fact is unavoidably interpreted by some as evidence of the nobility as a modernizing force.⁵⁴⁷ Instead, I argue, this understanding can be used to explore the dynamics of elite formation in late pre-modernity, independent of any modernizing framework. Seeing European elites through the prism of the late pre-modern Chinese elites, which were not as unchanging as earlier scholarship believed them to be, illuminates the common dynamics through which state building and commercialization in the late pre-modern world were central in shaping the dynamics of elite formation in both East and West.

Qing elites – civil and military

The process of elite formation in Qing China has been the subject of comparatively little research by Western scholars due to long-standing notions of the unity, permanence, and lack of dynamic potential of the dominant elites in China. Enough work, however, has been done to show that these notions fail to capture essential aspects of the functioning and development of social elites of the Qing dynasty.

The structure of Qing elites may be illuminated by the framework briefly outlined by Ernest Gellner in his 1983 book *Nations and Nationalism* (see

⁵⁴⁴ Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*.

⁵⁴⁵ Beik, "The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration."

⁵⁴⁶ Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility* was a central influence here.

⁵⁴⁷ e.g. Chaussinand-Nogaret, Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture*; This view is partly prefigured by Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*.

fig. 16).⁵⁴⁸ The vast majority of people in the pre-industrial world, including the Qing Empire, lived as agricultural producers in communities for the most part isolated from each other. In China proper, these could be thought of as the ‘standard marketing communities’ of around 7-8,000 individuals mentioned in a previous chapter.⁵⁴⁹ Elite groups in society transcended these isolated communities by participating in a literary high culture, which bound together and integrated elites across a large territory, while simultaneously excluding most of the population from participation due to the widespread illiteracy of pre-industrial society. In the terms of Michael Mann, participating in the organizational networks that cut across local communities enabled elites to “organizationally outflank” local networks of power, thereby maintaining their privileged status.⁵⁵⁰

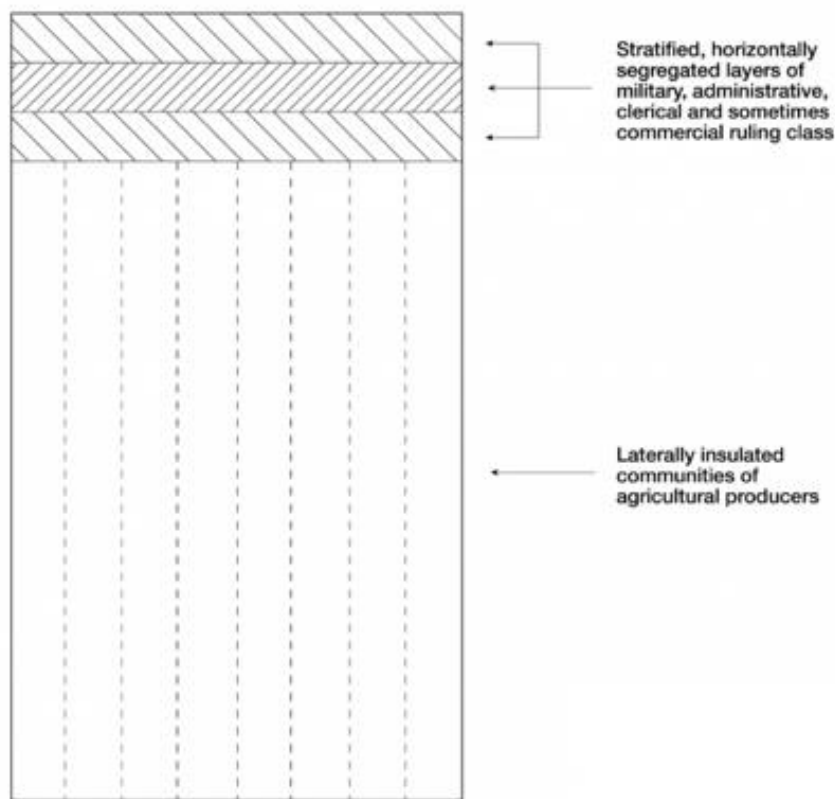


Fig. 16: Gellner's Model of Social Structure in Agrarian Societies

Source: Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 9

⁵⁴⁸ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, chap. 2; See also Hall, *Powers and Liberties*, 27–31.

⁵⁴⁹ Skinner, *Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China*. See also chapter 2 of this thesis.

⁵⁵⁰ Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*.

Three largely separate groups can be said to constitute the Qing elites.⁵⁵¹ The first is the imperial family, the Manchu clan known as the *Aisin Gioro*. The second is the chiefly military caste of Manchus and bannermen, descended from the Qing conquest armies. The third is the Chinese Confucian scholars known as the literati or the gentry. The ideology and structure of each of these differed markedly, and the imperial court related to each through simultaneous expressions of the Qing as a patrimonial family, a Manchu regime, and a Confucian dynasty.⁵⁵² In the following, I will bypass the imperial family due to its relatively small size, and focus solely on the Gentry and Bannermen.

The Gentry

The social group most often referred to when speaking of late pre-modern Chinese elites is the gentry. This was the social class from which the imperial officials were drawn, and which constituted the core of local elites in most of the Qing Empire. There has been some disagreement in the literature over whether the basis of gentry power either derived from their role as state officials, or from their economic dominance, i.e. their role as landowners. Older important works such as those by Ho Ping-Ti and Chung-li Chang focused solely on degree-holders, and thus came to stress state-elite relations.⁵⁵³ Conversely, Marxist scholars have focused on the gentry as a landowning class.⁵⁵⁴ In reality, the two forms of dominance, political and economic, were closely intertwined – economic power was a prerequisite for political power, which conversely guaranteed the maintenance of economic power. In any case, the formation and organization of the gentry was closely connected to developments in both state power and economy. Thus the developments sketched in the previous chapters – the increased commercialization of the economy and the increasingly lean state structure – bore with them changes in gentry society. While remembering the interdependence of political and economic aspects, we will here first focus on the political role of the gentry, and secondly the economic basis for its dominance.

⁵⁵¹ This is of course a simplification. Numerous local elite groups existed apart from the three mentioned here, but they were ultimately of lesser importance.

⁵⁵² See Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*.

⁵⁵³ Ho, *The Ladder of Success*; Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*; Chang, *The Income of the Chinese Gentry*.

⁵⁵⁴ See Grove and Daniels, *State and Society in China: Japanese Perspectives on Ming-Qing Social and Economic History*.

The defining role of the state

One of the central practices of empire is the production of hierarchy.⁵⁵⁵ To some degree, the state has the power to define social hierarchies and back them up with coercive power. This power is not absolute, as it is dependent on the societal acceptance of the defined hierarchy, which therefore cannot deviate too much from already established structures. Thus, the strong role of the Qing state in defining elites was the result of a long, gradual development, stretching back to the first millennium.⁵⁵⁶ Before 750, China was mainly ruled by aristocratic, hereditary elites.⁵⁵⁷ During the Song dynasty (960-1279) and after, these became increasingly replaced by the gentry, Confucian scholars recruited through a civil service examination system gradually constructed and maintained by the state. Over the period from the Song and stretching into the Qing dynasty, the meritocratic aspects of the examination system continued to be strengthened, and it became the only major route to official privilege and state office.⁵⁵⁸

By the time of the Qing, the examination system was central to the extremely formalized hierarchy of Chinese society. Examinations were held at a number of different levels, from local through provincial and metropolitan to palace examinations, with each level being associated with a formal degree guaranteeing a certain level of social prestige. The most important of these degrees in defining social stratification, however, were the lowest and highest degrees. The lowest degree of 'Licentiate' (*Shengyuan*) was of tremendous importance as it brought with it the official designation of gentry.⁵⁵⁹ This designation secured a number of privileges, most importantly partial exemption from taxation and the right to commute corporal punishments.⁵⁶⁰ But of equal importance was the fact that it brought access to the network of Confucian elites spanning the country.⁵⁶¹ The highest degree of 'Advanced Scholar' (*Jinshi*) was important insofar as it opened the door to appointment in the imperial bureaucracy, which

⁵⁵⁵ cf. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*.

⁵⁵⁶ Chen, "The State, the Gentry, and Local Institutions."

⁵⁵⁷ Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*; Elman, "Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction," 8.

⁵⁵⁸ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 96–7. There is some debate over the degree to which the sale of offices was practiced under the Qing, e.g. Zhang, "Legacy of Success."

⁵⁵⁹ Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*, 3–6.

⁵⁶⁰ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 128.

⁵⁶¹ Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761*.

brought major power, prestige, and wealth. Within the bureaucracy, a further well-defined hierarchy of 19 ranks established where on the ladder of prestige and authority anyone was located in relation to everyone else.⁵⁶²

The Qing state was thus central to the definition of who belonged to the recognized elite, and what formal privileges that entailed. The meritocratic examination system was ideal for the state, as it made political power dependent on the grace of the central state and thereby impeded the buildup of alternative centers of patrimonial political power.

Examinations and elite culture

Apart from functioning as a system of recruitment of officials and distribution of privilege, the examination system was a central tool for shaping an empire-wide elite culture, which bound the realm together as a unified polity. This was, as in the Gellner model, a high culture which was horizontally inclusive, but vertically exclusive – spanning the entire empire, but restricted to encompass only a narrow part of population.⁵⁶³

The establishment of a curriculum necessary to master for all examination students resulted in a standardization of high culture to an impressive degree by pre-modern standards.⁵⁶⁴ This was done by sustaining a classical canon of literature, the Confucian ‘classics’ as well as certain canonical commentaries on these. The stable nature of the canon created common reference points for all participants in the culture, enabling shared understanding. The examination system likewise sustained a common language, classical Chinese, which enabled people from all over the empire to communicate. Based on ancient Chinese writing, classical Chinese was a fixed, dead language far removed from any vernacular – as it belonged to no local group in particular, it belonged equally to everybody who mastered it. The horizontally inclusive aspects of Chinese elite culture are also evident in the system of quotas established for examination candidates. To ensure that no region or local groups should dominate, each province was given a quota of degrees to bestow on local candidates. Quotas were similarly in place for ethnic groups, guaranteeing the three ruling groups of Manchu, Mongol and Chinese a degree of representation. Various non-Chinese ‘minorities’ in the provinces were also given quotas in order to

⁵⁶² Watt, *The District Magistrate*, 20–1.

⁵⁶³ For an exploration of these aspects of high culture in a comparative perspective, see Johannings, “Reading the Signs.”

⁵⁶⁴ Elman, “The Social Roles of Literati,” 364–5.

facilitate their integration into the Chinese cultural sphere.⁵⁶⁵ In principle, Chinese elite culture was thus open to anybody, regardless of ethnic or geographical origins.

As much as Confucian culture was horizontally inclusive, it acted as an exclusionary mechanism for producing and reinforcing vertical hierarchies. In a society without public schooling, and basic literacy hence scarce, any written culture excludes a large majority of the population. This was true for Qing China as well, even if literacy rates were relatively high by pre-industrial standards.⁵⁶⁶ The requirement of classical Chinese proficiency exacerbated this fact. In practice, the examination system was only open to families who had the financial resources to pay for the education of their male children, as well as the cultural capital necessary to ensure success.⁵⁶⁷ In the 18th century, degree holders numbered around 750,000-1,000,000, only a fraction of a percent of the population. Even when including their families, the numbers amount only to 1.3% of the population.⁵⁶⁸

On top of this, there existed a large group of educated people, who nevertheless had failed the examinations. This was a substantial group, as intense competition meant that only 1.5% of the candidates passed any given entry level examination.⁵⁶⁹ Numbers are hard to come by, but Elman estimates a pool of around two million candidates existed by 1800.⁵⁷⁰ These would have been educated, and in that sense able to participate in elite networks and culture, but without attaining the privilege and prestige of an official designation as gentry. We will come back to these later.

Including candidates and degree-holders, the examination system thus reached some two to three million people in total at any given time. This made it a powerful tool of ideological control on the part of the state. Confucian ideology was closely entwined with the legitimacy of the state,

⁵⁶⁵ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 122–3.

⁵⁶⁶ Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy* is perhaps overtly optimistic regarding Qing literacy rates, but convincingly argues that China was near the high end of pre-industrial literacy rates.

⁵⁶⁷ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 126–34; Brook, “Family Continuity and Cultural Hegemony.”

⁵⁶⁸ Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*, 138–9.

⁵⁶⁹ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 107.

⁵⁷⁰ Elman, “The Social Roles of Literati,” 370.

and by sponsoring Confucianism the state ensured ideological stability and its own legitimacy.⁵⁷¹

Gentry as state agents

The relationship between state and gentry was one of mutual assistance. While the gentry provided legitimacy and officials to the state, the state provided privilege and wealth to the gentry. Apart from the already mentioned tax reduction and freedom from physical punishment, the gentry gained power by participating in governance throughout the provinces. With the state being as thin on the ground as we have seen in the previous chapter, many tasks of local governance was thrust in the hands of the local gentry. The practice of gentry involvement in governance has been described by Susan Mann, following Weber, as “liturgical governance”.⁵⁷² For the most part, public projects were funded, and controlled, by local gentry. Whenever the magistrate needed some large project done, such as a construction project, he would ask local gentry to contribute financially, and ultimately direct the whole process. The gentry funded and ran a host of public institutions, such as local schools, disaster relief, public granaries, examination halls, public temples as well as local militia.⁵⁷³ While this naturally cost the gentry substantial amounts of money, it also reinforced their power over local society. The gentry also provided consultation to the magistrates whenever they needed something done, as practically nothing could be accomplished without their help.

Acting as intermediaries between the state and local society offered ample opportunity for enrichment. Though this was not officially sanctioned, gentry often acted as tax collectors for the local peasants, using their superior status to pay lower tax rates while keeping the difference. Gentry also acted as sham holders of peasant-owned land, paying reduced tax rates and splitting the difference with the peasants in question.⁵⁷⁴ It is also not hard to see how control over public resources such as irrigation facilities or public granaries could be used to further one’s own interest in local society.

⁵⁷¹ Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State*, 279.

⁵⁷² Mann, *Local Merchants and the Chinese Bureaucracy*, chap. 1.

⁵⁷³ Ch’ü, *Local Government*, 182–5.

⁵⁷⁴ Ch’ü, 185–90; Shigeta, “The Origins and Structure of Gentry Rule,” 357–61.

Seen in a broader perspective, the relationship between state and elite was stable, because their interests were aligned. The state guaranteed a prominent role for the gentry in local society and the bureaucracy in return for dynastic loyalty. Otherwise it generally left the local power relationships of the gentry alone. For the gentry, power was more easily attained through cooperation and involvement with the state than without it, so through most of the period, very little practical opposition existed to imperial rule.⁵⁷⁵

Elite economics

For many observers, the political role of the gentry has appeared so central to their existence that the economic basis of their dominance has been relatively overlooked. But as we have seen, entry into the examinations required considerable financial and cultural resources, and millions of people apart from the gentry had the wherewithal to compete for degrees, though they ultimately failed. It is therefore important to look to this larger group of people from whom the gentry was drawn.

The first thing to note when we look at the economic background of the gentry is the great diversity of local contexts from which the elites sprang. Some came from families of local strongmen, some came from military backgrounds, some had mercantile roots, and so on.⁵⁷⁶ This makes sense in a Gellnerian perspective – as soon as we look beneath the layer of Confucian culture, diversity rules. Some general statements, though, can be drawn from the literature. First of all, we must affirm the central importance of land ownership to the maintenance of elite status. This is not immediately obvious due to the prevalent practice in China of partible inheritance. Wealth amassed in a family had to be shared between all male offspring, thus strongly inhibiting the accumulation of large, patrimonial estates such as those seen in Europe. However, following the work of Hilary Beattie, the central role of land ownership to the maintenance of elite status has come to be more recognized.⁵⁷⁷ What Beattie and subsequent scholarship has found is that elite groups, broadly understood as locally leading lineages, followed a long-term strategy of acquiring land and

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State*, 14 and passim.

⁵⁷⁶ As shown in e.g. Meskill, *A Chinese Pioneer Family*; Schoppa, *Chinese Elites and Political Change*.

⁵⁷⁷ Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China*.

investing in education of their male children, often with considerable success. By continually plowing profits back into land and education in the hopes of a family member attaining an examination degree, elite families could retain their dominant position in their local societies for centuries.⁵⁷⁸ Landownership thus acted as a material basis for education, and the intermittent production of degree-holders facilitated further economic gains.

As landownership was to a considerable degree commercialized, land being frequently and freely traded on the market, local elites acted more like investors or commercial brokers than feudal landlords. The 17th and 18th centuries saw the advance of landlord absenteeism in commercialized areas, where landowning elites increasingly resided in cities, contributing to breaking down the distinction between merchant and gentry landownership.⁵⁷⁹ Already by the Ming dynasty, formal exclusion of Merchant families from the examination system had ended, providing opportunities for those to enter the elite as well.⁵⁸⁰ Gentry culture, of course, did not remain unchanged by commercialization either. A number of studies have documented the emergence of a vibrant material culture during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. As a response to the growing commercialization, opportunities for luxury consumption expanded and came to play a stronger role in elite interaction.⁵⁸¹ It thus should come as no surprise that gentry also participated in other commercial ventures, such as trade or finance. Commercial wealth, in fact, seems to have played a large and growing role in attaining elite status.⁵⁸² This fact contrasts clearly with the quite negative appraisals of merchant activity often found in Confucian circles. Merchants were often officially disparaged, and their profit-seeking attitude disdained, in contrast to the official extolling of the virtues of agricultural life. This attitude, carried on from ancient times, continued to be espoused all the while social and cultural distinctions between merchant and gentry groups were breaking down. Observing the fusion of these two classes, Esherick and Rankin describe the negative attitudes to merchants as becoming “more pro forma than real”.⁵⁸³ However, ‘pro forma’ disdain of merchants served a function of reinforcing social stratification, forcing

⁵⁷⁸ Rowe, “Success Stories,” 57–9; Brook, “Family Continuity and Cultural Hegemony.”

⁵⁷⁹ Shigeta, “The Origins and Structure of Gentry Rule,” 361; Schoppa, *Chinese Elites and Political Change*.

⁵⁸⁰ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 136.

⁵⁸¹ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*; Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*.

⁵⁸² Rowe, “Success Stories,” 63–5; Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 112; Esherick and Rankin, “Concluding Remarks,” 311–3.

⁵⁸³ Esherick and Rankin, “Concluding Remarks,” 331.

merchant groups to assimilate to gentry culture if they wished to advance socially. The pattern we observe is therefore one in which families often depended on mercantile activity to obtain wealth, but then converted their holdings to land and degrees once elite status was attained.⁵⁸⁴

Military elites – Manchus and Bannermen

The Qing dynasty has traditionally been classified as a ‘conquest dynasty’, as it originated in the conquest of China by the Manchu people in the mid-17th century. This classification is both problematic and useful. It is problematic because it tends to obscure the fact that all Chinese dynasties were established by conquest by some elite group who subsequently came to rule over others. On the other hand, it is useful because in the Qing case, China was conquered by a non-Han group holding itself to be ethnically distinct from the Chinese, and who was using this ethnic distinction as a tool of elite formation and imperial control.

Simplified views of clear-cut ethnic distinctions between Chinese and Manchus have long ago been abandoned. It is by now commonplace to see ethnic identities as socially constructed phenomena, and this holds for the Manchus as well. The term ‘Manchu’ as a common identity to embrace all (formerly) Jurchen tribal peoples was only used from 1635 as part of the state-making initiatives of successive Qing monarchs before their conquest of China.⁵⁸⁵ Manchu identity was thus from the beginning tightly connected to the ruling strategies of the Qing state, although with a basis in already existing identities. After the Qing conquest, Manchu identity was politically maintained and used as a tool of social differentiation, which facilitated Qing rule.⁵⁸⁶

Manchu identity was closely connected with the Banner system. The entire conquest population, which consisted of Manchus, Mongols, and ethnic Chinese, were organized into military-political units known as the Banners. These were multifaceted institutions of military origin, delimiting an exclusive, hereditary caste of warriors tied to the Qing regime.⁵⁸⁷ Given that all Manchus were part of the Banner system, ‘Manchuness’ was in practice defined by membership in the banners, and over time, the distinctions between Manchu and Bannerman became somewhat muddy, leading large

⁵⁸⁴ Esherick and Rankin, 311–3; Rowe, “Success Stories,” 57–9.

⁵⁸⁵ Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 63.

⁵⁸⁶ Crossley, “Thinking About Ethnicity”; Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*.

⁵⁸⁷ Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 39–42.

numbers of Chinese and Mongol bannermen to be reclassified as Manchu or at least treated as such.⁵⁸⁸

Organized as a military force, the Bannermen were confined to garrisons spread out over the empire, physically separated from the rest of society. In this way they could act as the military backbone of the imperial state, and were ideally kept from developing local ties, which would compromise their loyalty to the state. Maintaining their total separation from the surrounding society was of course impossible, and successive emperors often worried about the loss of the supposedly “old traditions of the Manchus”.⁵⁸⁹ Given the perceived threats to the separate identity of the Manchus, the state gradually enforced a stricter observation of boundaries, by regulating a formalized “Manchu” cultural education and compiling genealogies of Banner descent by the Banner households.⁵⁹⁰

As an elite group, the Bannermen enjoyed a number of privileges. First of all, every Bannerman received a monthly rice and silver stipend. Secondly, Bannermen had preferential access to government positions through a system of deliberately biased quotas, with the banner presence being greater in the higher rungs of the imperial government.⁵⁹¹ Thirdly, having a distinct legal status, Bannermen were immune to civil prosecution and often treated leniently in the military judicial system. Bannermen were thus judicially, economically and politically privileged by the state.

In spite of their privileged status, Bannermen were far from universally well off. As the total number of Bannermen grew in step with the rest of the population, common resources had to be shared among more people, and individual stipends diminished. However, in spite of numerous individual cases of poverty, the Bannermen remained a privileged group throughout the Qing, producing most of the high government officials and retaining their judicial and economic advantages. While the idealized picture of the Bannermen as a pure warrior caste untainted by Chinese society and living frugally was challenged by reality, the Banner system retained its importance. This was because the distinction between Bannermen and Chinese was a political one, and thus not dependent on any ‘real’ difference between individuals of the two groups. Political stratification

⁵⁸⁸ Elliott, 13–5, 329–44.

⁵⁸⁹ Elliott, 11; Naquin and Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, 18–9.

⁵⁹⁰ Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 306–11; Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 326–9.

⁵⁹¹ Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, chap. 4.

was upheld as a tool of imperial Manchu control, and the distinctions mattered even though they could not be backed up by cultural differences and economic superiority.

Summary

The Qing state maintained a tight hold on its social elites through the 17th and 18th centuries. The Chinese civil elites, the gentry, were established centuries earlier as a state-oriented and -created service elite. The gentry participated in an empire-wide elite culture patronized by the imperial court, which acted as a tool for both empire-wide integration and vertical hierarchization. The political and economic dominance of the gentry was mutually reinforcing, in a pattern where landownership provided the basis for political power, which in turn guaranteed continued wealth. Commercial wealth often entered into the system, but was generally transferred into land and political office. The Qing Bannermen constituted a politically and ethnically defined military elite, privileged and provided for by the state. The interdependence of Bannermen and state was extremely close – Bannermen manned many of the top official posts, but were simultaneously utterly dependent on the state for their privileged existence, as they had no autonomous base of power to rely on.

French nobility between the sword and the robe

Assessments of the social and political elite of 17th and 18th-century France, the nobility, have inevitably been colored by their unhappy fate in the French Revolution. Traditional scholarship has treated the nobility as an outdated force, destined to crumble. Elias saw the fate of the nobility sealed by the growing power of the state, as they became entrapped in the ‘gilded cage’ of the court at Versailles, while Tocqueville noted their loss of vitality and political authority and eventual assimilation into the bourgeoisie.⁵⁹² Marxist scholars have similarly interpreted the nobility as being outflanked by capitalism and the bourgeoisie.⁵⁹³ Since the 1970’s a wave of revisionist scholarship has successfully challenged the narrative of decline, and placed the nobility at the forefront of modern developments –

⁵⁹² Elias, *The Court Society*; Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*.

⁵⁹³ See Kates, *The French Revolution, Recent Debates and New Controversies*.

in the words of Jay M. Smith, the nobles were “as modern and progressive as anyone.”⁵⁹⁴

However, by using the Chinese case as a basis for comparison, we can get a different perspective from the traditional dichotomy of decline versus modernization, and interpret what we observe as an example of pre-modern change largely driven by similarly pre-modern processes of state formation and commercialization.

State-elite formation

The meaning and significance of ‘nobility’ in France was a product of the changing times, and the growing presence of the state was a decisive factor for what it meant to be noble. The French state never had the degree of control over elite formation that the Qing did, both due to the earlier weakness of the state, which had left a group of autonomously established nobles in the provinces, and to the principle of heredity governing noble status. The hereditary aspect of nobility meant that even as the state took control over the conferment of noble status, as we will see, nobility retained a feature of being in the patrimonial possession of families, which guaranteed a degree of independence from the state. Even so, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the influence of the French state in elite matters increased greatly.

Nobility before the formation of the bureaucratic-imperial state had been a somewhat loose concept about being of ‘good stock’, a title conferred to, or arrogated by, the leading members of society.⁵⁹⁵ Being noble meant having a certain lifestyle of leisure, and by ‘living nobly’ a family could without great trouble enter the ranks of nobility.⁵⁹⁶ From the 17th century, the growing state took over the function of defining and guarding the ranks of nobility, closing the door on the possibility of entering the nobility through mere noble living.⁵⁹⁷

Under the bureaucratic-imperial state, nobility came to be defined more precisely by the state through a number of privileges given from above. Members of the nobility were partially or wholly exempted from a number

⁵⁹⁴ Smith, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, 2.

⁵⁹⁵ Descimon, “Nobles de Lignage et Noblesse de Service,” 295–7.

⁵⁹⁶ Huppert, *Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes*.

⁵⁹⁷ Swann, “The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century,” 157–8; Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 137.

of taxes, had a number of judicial privileges, and had greater access to offices in government, many of which were exclusively reserved for nobles.⁵⁹⁸ Through state mediation, a more formalized hierarchy of noble titles was put in place, which prescribed ordered patterns of interaction between different groups.⁵⁹⁹ The state thus shaped the previously amorphous mass of nobles into a more well-defined corporative order spanning the realm, whose privileged position was guaranteed by monarchical power.⁶⁰⁰

Entry into the nobility was now guarded by the state, but the state provided ample opportunity for ennoblement through state service. A number of government offices, which could be acquired through purchase, conferred nobility upon its holders, and this became the primary way to attain noble status. A large number of commoners were in this way ennobled, creating what came to be known as the ‘nobility of the robe’. This new nobility came to encompass around two-thirds of the nobility by the late 18th century, half of which had been ennobled only in the previous century.⁶⁰¹ This naturally invited opposition from the older ‘nobility of the sword’, named so because they based their legitimacy on their traditional role as a military class. The nobility of the sword responded to the challenges of the newcomers by closing their own ranks, and developing a racially legitimizing ideology, on which more below.

By thus creating an elite of officeholders, and by fashioning these into a formal order sustained by state power, the interests of the elite became more closely aligned with that of the state. The nobility became a service nobility, working with and through the state to maintain their positions to the interest of all involved parties.⁶⁰² This was what Elias and others interpreted as the ‘domestication of the nobility’ by the court, and this view has substantial merit. But it is also important to remember that the system was greatly beneficial to the nobles themselves. The ‘gilded cage’ of Versailles, in which the powerful nobles were supposedly kept to curtail their independence, was of course the most powerful institution of the

⁵⁹⁸ Bossenga, “Society,” 57–8; Descimon, “Nobles de Lignage et Noblesse de Service,” 295–7.

⁵⁹⁹ Elias, *The Court Society*.

⁶⁰⁰ Haddad, “La Robe comme Observatoire,” 15; cf. Mousnier, *Les Institutions de la France*, who described the Old Regime as a “Society of Orders”; See also Arriaza, “Mousnier and Barber.”

⁶⁰¹ Lewis, *France, 1715-1804*, 74; Bossenga, “A Divided Nobility,” 44, 63.

⁶⁰² Giesey, “State-Building in Early Modern France,” 207.

realm, and by residing there the nobility kept their hands close to the levers of state power.⁶⁰³ In this sense, serving the state also meant serving oneself.

Elite economics

Even though noble status was in itself not dependent on economic wealth, and a substantial proportion of the nobility led meager lives, wealth and status were closely intertwined.⁶⁰⁴ The relationship between wealth and status went both ways – status begot wealth, and wealth begot status. The French nobility was therefore greatly influenced by the commercialization of the economy, as well as by the increased participation of the state in the economic sphere.

The principal source of income for the nobility was landownership, as had always been so. Around a quarter of the land was owned by the nobility, despite them constituting only about 1% of the population.⁶⁰⁵ Land was traditionally important to the nobility of the sword, but newly ennobled robes also tended to acquire landholdings, both as a source of stable profits and because of the respectability they conferred upon their owners.⁶⁰⁶ Income from land was supplemented by income from various seigneurial rights which came with large landholdings. Apart from receiving seigneurial dues from the peasantry, various privileges connected with the seigneuries, such as forestry rights etc., could be used to squeeze resources out of the subject population.⁶⁰⁷ Especially in highly commercialized areas seigneurial power was often employed to distort markets and reap substantial gains.⁶⁰⁸ Over the 17th and 18th centuries, nobles found ways to expand such seigneurial rights by depending on state power to back them up, usually by rulings of provincial courts manned by their peers.⁶⁰⁹

Office holding represented another great source of income for the nobility. Having secured an office, an official received yearly payments regardless

⁶⁰³ Campbell, *Power and Politics*, 24–5; Bély, “The New Monarchy in France,” 172; Duindam, “The Court as a Meeting Point.”

⁶⁰⁴ Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, 134; On the substantial noble poverty, see Bossenga, “A Divided Nobility,” 66.

⁶⁰⁵ Swann, “The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century,” 163; Mettam, “The French Nobility,” 147.

⁶⁰⁶ Mettam, “The French Nobility,” 145.

⁶⁰⁷ Swann, “The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century,” 164–5.

⁶⁰⁸ Bossenga, “A Divided Nobility,” 54–5.

⁶⁰⁹ Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, chap. 1.

of whether the office included any actual work. What could be worth more were the opportunities for exploiting the positions of power conferred by the offices.⁶¹⁰ A third type of income came from financial activity, usually in the form of loans to the state.⁶¹¹

In certain veins of revisionism, spearheaded by Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, a growing trend of commercial and industrial investment by the nobility has been identified and propped up as evidence that the nobles “join[ed] the ranks of modern capitalism, [and threw] off the weight of tradition”.⁶¹² This is somewhat surprising in a society where nobles were by law prohibited from engaging in commerce, and noble ideology looked upon merchants with contempt.⁶¹³ But indeed, the barrier between nobility and commerce was far from watertight. A number of nobles engaged in commercial ventures, often using straw men to hide their tracks.⁶¹⁴ Especially in the southern parts of the kingdom did nobles thus proceed, even sometimes receiving exemptions from the rule that barred them from commerce.⁶¹⁵ In the end, even though numbers are hard to get at due to the secrecy surrounding noble commercial activity, it still appears that commerce remained a fringe activity among the nobility, with only a tiny minority actively engaging in it.⁶¹⁶

The main way we can see commercial life intruding on the nobility was another – the recruitment of commercial families into the noble ranks. As ennobling offices were up for sale, large amounts of commercial money was plowed into these, as families with commercial backgrounds sought to enter the political elite. This form of social advancement was normally coupled with investments in land, as land remained the ideologically ‘proper’ economic basis for the nobility.⁶¹⁷ In this way we see the same movement of money and people into the elite as we observed for the Qing – commercial wealth is turned into landed wealth as commercial agents become part of the political elite. This resulted in a replenishment of the

⁶¹⁰ Mousnier, *Les Institutions de la France*, vol. II, 38.

⁶¹¹ Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir et société au grand siècle*.

⁶¹² Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility*, 113.

⁶¹³ Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV*, 54–63.

⁶¹⁴ Root, *The Fountain of Privilege*, 37; Mettam, “The French Nobility,” 147.

⁶¹⁵ Bohanan, *Old and New Nobility in Aix-En-Provence, 1600-1695*; Huppert, *Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes*, 30.

⁶¹⁶ Swann, “The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century,” 168–70.

⁶¹⁷ Bossenga, “A Divided Nobility,” 49.

elite from other sectors of society, even as it upheld the formal distinctions between orders.

The flow of commercial wealth and people into the nobility, along with state service becoming a primary entry route, also had effects on noble culture. An increasing prevalence of absentee landownership, with nobles preferring their town residences to their landed estates, meant that urban ('bourgeois') culture and values increasingly seeped into the nobility.⁶¹⁸ As state service in the civil administration became a larger part of what it meant to be noble, educational ideals moved away from purely military ones to encompass classical, humanist learning, which would enable participation in the culture of public power.⁶¹⁹ And as the work of Elias has shown, court life resulted in the increased valuation of state service and strict self-control, at the expense of earlier warrior values.⁶²⁰ We thus see a mix of what has in Marxist writing been described as the "embourgeoisement" of the nobility and the "féodalisation" of the commercial class.⁶²¹ Certain elements of urban culture entered the nobility as it changed in the face of state formation and commercialization, but the nobility retained, or even strengthened, its role as a privileged elite group rooted in their dominance of the land.

Reshaping a military caste

The warrior ethos of the old nobility of the sword did not entirely disappear in the face of the previously noted changes, but came to be redefined and retooled for the changing times. Challenged by the growing power of the nobility of the robe, an ideological reaction developed among the nobility of the sword. This reaction was manifested as a stronger focus on genealogy and descent as legitimization of noble status. The nobility of the sword was reenvisioned as a true birth nobility, presented as the descendants of the Frankish conquerors of old, while the rest of the population was supposedly descended from the indigenous Gallic population. The Sword nobility thus presented themselves as racially distinct from the rest

⁶¹⁸ Swann, "The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century," 165–72; Bohanan, *Old and New Nobility in Aix-En-Provence, 1600-1695*.

⁶¹⁹ Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture*, 79–86.

⁶²⁰ Elias, *The Court Society*; Elias, *The Civilizing Process*; This has subsequently been reaffirmed by Smith, "The Culture of Merit in Old Regime France."

⁶²¹ Giesey, "State-Building in Early Modern France."

of the population, robes included.⁶²² This racial ideology has been described as “the last bastion of the lineage nobles, who had lost the mastery of their social reproduction in face of the affirmation of the authority of the state”.⁶²³

However, this slightly derogative view misses the point that it fitted well with institutional developments in the 18th century French army. A number of army reforms, most notably the Ségur Reform touched upon in the previous chapter, worked to limit the recruitment of military officers to old noble families and those with a military history. In institutional practice, the old nobility of the sword was thereby reshaped into something resembling a military caste.⁶²⁴ From the point of view of the state, this had the effect of diminishing the influence of money in military organization, instead favoring professionalism.⁶²⁵ The military ethos of this caste was reshaped as to conform to the ‘authority of the state’. The ideology of noble martial honor was preserved, but coupled with more ‘robe’ ideals of a nobility of service.⁶²⁶

So, while a degree of social assimilation between sword and robe nobility did happen, institutional arrangements reinforced certain distinctions in order to preserve the ideal of a military caste untainted by the surrounding commercialization of society.⁶²⁷ As in the example of the Qing Banner-men, formalized stratification was introduced in order to reinforce hierarchies under threat by commercialization and cultural assimilation.

Summary

Over the course of the late pre-modern period, French elites were changed profoundly by the rise of the bureaucratic-imperial state and the commercialization of the economy. From an amorphous mass of great families, the nobility was turned into an elite order, defined and upheld by state power, which conversely drew its strength from that order. The nobility was thus shaped into a Gellnerian elite, which could depend on a horizontally organized political and cultural framework to further its interests vis-

⁶²² Lewis, *France, 1715-1804*, 72.

⁶²³ Descimon, “Nobles de Lignage et Noblesse de Service,” 297, my translation.

⁶²⁴ Bien, Smith, and Blaufarb, *Caste, Class and Profession in Old Regime France*.

⁶²⁵ Doyle, “Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?,” 112.

⁶²⁶ Blaufarb, “Noble Privilege and Absolutist State Building,” 244–5; Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, chap. 8.

⁶²⁷ Haddad, “La Robe comme Observatoire,” 24.

à-vis local society. The growing commercialization of society simultaneously influenced elite culture, which developed in a more 'bourgeois' direction. Landownership nevertheless remained the main source of income for the elites, though even that was also commercialized to a degree. The traditional military vocation of the old nobility was also refashioned into a more clearly defined military caste serving the state.

The Habsburg Empire – creation of an imperial elite

In contrast to the French nobility, the elites of the Habsburg Empire have always been recognized to have retained their power and independence throughout late pre-modernity and well into the 19th century, even in the face of growing state power. Their persistent domination of the agrarian economy through the system of seigneurial demesnes, together with continued political representation through provincial Estates guaranteed the dominant social role of the nobility.⁶²⁸

This picture to a large degree remains valid. However, also in the Habsburg lands, the growing power of the state was intrinsically linked with a transformation in elite society and organization. This process both had similarities and differences with what we have observed for China and France, and can thus further qualify our picture of elite formation in late pre-modernity.

State-elite formation

The nobility of the Habsburg lands was a disparate group, and before the 17th century it is doubtful whether one could really classify them as anything resembling a 'Habsburg elite'. Even as we restrict our scope to deal only with the nobilities of the core Habsburg territories of Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary, nobilities were separately organized on territorial lines. This territorial division is mirrored in the scholarly literature, which similarly tends to treat separately the nobilities of the various territories making up the Habsburg Empire. On a political level, this division persisted throughout our period, with the nobility of each territory oriented toward separate provincial Estates providing the primary link between state and elite. The Estates retained a strong role in the mediation of the bestowal (or removal) of rights, privileges and titles, and continued to act as the

⁶²⁸ See e.g. Spielman, *Leopold I of Austria*, 19.

main source of government on the ground.⁶²⁹ The court did therefore not primarily rely on a state-created 'robe' nobility to consolidate its power.⁶³⁰ Instead, the Habsburg court based its state-making on the consolidation of a magnate class of wealthy and powerful landowners across its territories.

Ever since this was first argued by Robert Evans in *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, it has been recognized that the main strategy for fusing together the Empire into a single political unit was through the creation of an elite culture centered on the Habsburg dynasty.⁶³¹ This elite or high culture was based on the fusion of counter-reformation Catholicism with dynastic loyalty to the Habsburgs as defenders of the traditional order.⁶³² One aspect of the importance accorded to Catholicism in the Habsburg high culture was the exclusion of the significant number of Protestants in the realm from state service, as well as the general repression of Protestantism.⁶³³ When opportunity arose in Bohemia after the defeat of the Estates in 1620, vast amounts of land were confiscated from Protestants and given to Catholic noblemen loyal to the state, providing the basis for a small group of Catholic magnates to dominate there.⁶³⁴ In Hungary, the state granted hereditary titles of high nobility to hitherto untitled Catholic magnates in an effort to bring them into the state-wide aristocracy.⁶³⁵

A central aspect of the construction of a Habsburg elite culture was the development of a more splendid court society in Vienna around which the magnate class could orient themselves. Though never quite as imposing as the French court at Versailles, the Habsburg court provided plenty of resources of both an honorific and more concrete nature to make the aristocrats see value in spending increasing amounts of their time there.⁶³⁶ From the late 17th century, Vienna thus became the center of aristocratic

⁶²⁹ Godsey, *The Sineus of Habsburg Power*, 48–9 and passim.

⁶³⁰ Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, 41.

⁶³¹ Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*; For a review of its impact, see Murdock, "The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy: A Review Article."

⁶³² Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 311.

⁶³³ Krueger, *Czech, German, and Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia*, 25.

⁶³⁴ Evans, "The Habsburg Monarchy and Bohemia, 1526–1848," 142; Melton, "The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands," 174.

⁶³⁵ Schimert, "The Early Modern Hungarian Nobility," 216; See also Vermes, "Eighteenth-Century Hungary."

⁶³⁶ Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*; Pečar, *Die Ökonomie der Ehre*.

life, reflected in the spree of palace-building by the magnates.⁶³⁷ The gathering into Vienna of aristocrats from the diverse territories of the empire was crucial in the development of a trans-territorial 'Habsburg' elite culture, lessening the aristocracy's dependence on both local-territorial and broader European cultural forms and identities.⁶³⁸

The Habsburg court's cultural and political patronage of the magnate class was coupled with the consolidation of magnate power within the state bureaucracy. A relatively small group of elite families tended to monopolize all important positions of power in the state and all of its constituent parts, including provincial Estates.⁶³⁹ The same group also largely gained control over important positions in the ecclesiastical institutions, which in all important aspects acted as just another set of feudal lords.⁶⁴⁰

In a sense, the aristocrats moving into state office constituted a partial development of this group into a 'service nobility', as office-holding within the state became increasingly important for them, both in terms of economic gain and in terms of identity.⁶⁴¹ This was furthered by the fact that it was often the non-inheriting younger sons of the aristocracy that held positions of real power, while leading aristocrats mainly confined themselves to more ceremonial offices.⁶⁴² From the middle of the 18th century, the traditional nobles were increasingly joined by newly ennobled officials, the "nobility of letters", created by the administrative state of Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II.⁶⁴³ From the 1780's, this included a growing number of people of commercial or financial families. These can be seen as constituting the beginnings of a Habsburg 'nobility of the robe'. However, even though a substantial number of commoners were ennobled as part of government service, they generally obtained only lesser titles, and

⁶³⁷ Kann, "Aristocracy in the Eighteenth Century Habsburg Empire," 5; Krueger, *Czech, German, and Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia*, 36; Melton, "The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands," 196.

⁶³⁸ Krueger, *Czech, German, and Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia*, 46; Melton, "The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands," 196.

⁶³⁹ Winkelbauer, "Krise Der Aristokratie?," 329; Macartney, *The Habsburg Empire*, 51; Godsey, *The Sinews of Habsburg Power*, 39.

⁶⁴⁰ Krueger, *Czech, German, and Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia*, 50; Schimert, "The Early Modern Hungarian Nobility," 219.

⁶⁴¹ Scott, "The Evolution of Service Nobilities," 10–11.

⁶⁴² Kann, "Aristocracy in the Eighteenth Century Habsburg Empire," 6–8.

⁶⁴³ Melton, "The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands," 194–5; Evans, "The Nobility of Hungary in the Eighteenth Century."

were never in a position to threaten the established aristocrats as power-holders as they did in France.⁶⁴⁴

The late pre-modern Habsburg state thus consolidated its power through the creation of an imperial high culture, which could transcend its internal territorial boundaries. Contrary to earlier nationalist interpretations of this phenomenon as a form of German cultural domination, or “germanization”, the elite culture of the Habsburg Empire was far from ‘ethnic’ in any sense of the word, and was on the contrary theoretically open to the participation of all.⁶⁴⁵ The hierarchization established was precisely not one between ethnic cultures, but a vertical one between the high nobility and the rest of the population. Thus Austrians, Bohemians, Hungarians and others with the wealth and social positions necessary to participate in Habsburg elite society all did so, at the expense of localism.⁶⁴⁶

Elite economics

To an even larger degree than in the Chinese and French cases, the economic dominance of the Habsburg nobility was based on landholding. In the core Habsburg territories, landholding patterns were characterized by a manorial system, where seigneurial landlords held large demesnes farmed by a semi-unfree peasantry who were legally obliged to work a number of days per week for the landlord.⁶⁴⁷ Although this system was gradually reformed in the context of commercialization, as we saw in chapter 3, the manorial structure remained the dominant form of agricultural organization in the Habsburg lands throughout late pre-modernity.

The political stratification between the magnate class and the lesser nobility described above was mirrored in the economic realm. Over time, landownership tended to get more concentrated in the hands of relatively few magnate families across the Monarchy, at the expense of the lesser nobility.⁶⁴⁸ An important aspect of the aristocratic consolidation was the increased establishment of entails, a legal device insuring the inalienability

⁶⁴⁴ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 79-82; For the opposite view, see Beller, *A Concise History of Austria*, 90.

⁶⁴⁵ Krueger, *Czech, German, and Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia*, chap. 1.

⁶⁴⁶ Evans, “The Habsburg Monarchy and Bohemia, 1526-1848,” 149; Evans, “The Nobility of Hungary in the Eighteenth Century.”

⁶⁴⁷ This was only partially true for Austria, see Knittler, “Between East and West.”

⁶⁴⁸ Winkelbauer, “Krise Der Aristokratie?”; Dickson, *Finance and Government*, 83, 103.

of land from family holdings as well as instituting the practice of primogeniture.⁶⁴⁹ The establishment of these entails required monarchical approval, and was legally confined to the nobility, so here the state played a role in reinforcing the economic dominance of the politically connected magnate class.⁶⁵⁰ Another way in which the state furthered the economic interests of the magnate class was through partial tax exemptions on noble land, even though this exemption was not as far-reaching as in either France or China. Finally, positions in the top layer of officialdom could bring with them special privileges, such as the role of contractor for the imperial armies, with substantial economic benefit apart from the more unofficial ways of making government service remunerative.⁶⁵¹

A further aspect in which economic relations mirrored political developments was the increasing trans-territoriality of magnate landholding, as aristocratic families obtained estates across the boundaries of Habsburg lands. This enabled the magnate class to have the right of political representation in multiple Estates, and helped fuse the upper nobility into a more unified Habsburg elite.⁶⁵²

Until the late 18th century, the growing commercialization of the Habsburg lands was generally contained within the setting of the manorial economy, and did therefore not obstruct the dominance of the landed elite. Rather, landholders profitably participated in the commercialized economy by establishing small-scale manufacture on their demesnes and using their seigniorial rights to shape markets to their gain.⁶⁵³ This did not so much reflect a commercial mindset of the nobility as much as it was done with a more traditional, paternalistic approach.⁶⁵⁴ In the Habsburg lands, commercialization did thus not to a significant degree impact traditional social structure, perhaps due to its lesser advance than in France and China.

The vast estate complexes of the magnate class acted as a material base, which enabled the aristocracy to preserve a great deal of independence

⁶⁴⁹ Melton, "The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands," 85–6.

⁶⁵⁰ Krueger, *Czech, German, and Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia*, 37–8.

⁶⁵¹ Dickson, *Finance and Government*, vol. I, 78–119; Kann, "Aristocracy in the Eighteenth Century Habsburg Empire," 5–6.

⁶⁵² Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 169; Melton, "The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands," 181.

⁶⁵³ Knittler, "Between East and West."

⁶⁵⁴ Freudenberger, *The Waldstein Woolen Mill*.

from the state.⁶⁵⁵ With often thousands of families under their jurisdiction, estates could be small political, social, and economic worlds in their own right, with quasi-governmental structure, bureaucracy, courts and all.⁶⁵⁶ The nearly autonomous nature of these estates has been described by Thomas Winkelbauer as “seigneurial absolutism”.⁶⁵⁷ In the late 18th century, the reforms of Maria Theresia and Joseph II slowly began to erode the manorial system, but did not substantially challenge the power of the magnates.⁶⁵⁸

Military elites

The evolution of a military elite in the Habsburg Empire took a distinct path from what we have seen in the Chinese and French cases. The main reason for this was the Habsburgs’ general lack of an indigenous group with strong roots in a military tradition. The Habsburg nobility, especially the higher aristocrats, took very little interest in martial values and practices, preferring careers in the civil bureaucracy or as managers of their own estates. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, indigenous nobles did possess military offices, but mostly as possessions of prestige or as objects of investment, and not out of interest in or proficiency with military matters.⁶⁵⁹ Proficient military command of the Habsburg armies was instead procured from a large number of men from outside the core territories of the Empire, particularly from Italy and the German principalities.⁶⁶⁰

By the 18th century, this lack of an indigenous military elite began to be seen as increasingly problematic, and by mid-century efforts were undertaken to create such an elite almost from scratch. Since the established nobility could not be depended on, reforms were enacted to ensure the ennoblement of officers with commoner background.⁶⁶¹ Simultaneously, centers of military education were instituted, which acted both as centers of professional learning and social disciplining of this newly created elite.⁶⁶²

⁶⁵⁵ Melton, “The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands,” 181–2.

⁶⁵⁶ Melton, 189.

⁶⁵⁷ Winkelbauer, “Sozialdisziplinierung Und Konfessionalisierung,” 338.

⁶⁵⁸ Melton, “The Nobility in the Bohemian and Austrian Lands,” 199.

⁶⁵⁹ Hochedlinger, *Austria’s Wars of Emergence*, 305–7.

⁶⁶⁰ Barker, *Army, Aristocracy, Monarchy*, 15; Hochedlinger, “Mars Ennobled,” 143–4.

⁶⁶¹ Barker, *Army, Aristocracy, Monarchy*, 20; Hochedlinger, “Mars Ennobled,” 162.

⁶⁶² Hochedlinger, “Mars Ennobled,” 153–62; Barker, *Army, Aristocracy, Monarchy*, 144–5.

By the end of the 18th century, a distinct military nobility had emerged, largely separate from the magnate class that constituted most of the civil and economic elite. In contrast to both China and France, this military elite remained necessarily open, as the Habsburgs needed newcomers to form its base.⁶⁶³ Even so, substantial and mostly successful effort was made to enroll the sons of officers to military academies, creating the basis for the emergence of regular military dynasties.⁶⁶⁴

Summary

The emergence of the Habsburg state coincided with the formation of a trans-territorial elite of immensely wealthy landowners unified and bound to the state by a common elite culture. This group of magnates remained the essential powerholders at all levels of society throughout late pre-modernity. From the mid-18th century, the formation of the Habsburg Empire as a bureaucratic-imperial state resulted in the first steps of the creation of a 'robe' service nobility, but this remained in its infancy throughout the 18th century. Similarly, only in the late 18th century did commercial culture begin to seriously intrude in elite spheres, and then only slowly. Lastly, at the same time a distinct military elite began to take form.

Conclusion

Looking at elite formation in China, France, and the Habsburg Empire, we get a broad view into how late pre-modern developments in state formation and commercialization, as described in previous chapters, impacted and coincided with change in social stratification. Although the social, political, and economic context of elite formation differed substantially between the three cases, a number of common strategies and dynamics are clearly visible.

Elites and the bureaucratic-imperial state

The first point to note is the important role of the state in shaping elites, even as the elites themselves shaped the state. In all our cases, the state is present in defining hierarchies, guaranteeing privileges, and shaping elite culture. However, the degree to which the state had and enacted these

⁶⁶³ Hochedlinger, "Mars Ennobled," 164–5.

⁶⁶⁴ Hochedlinger, 169.

powers differed in relation to the degree of development of the bureaucratic-imperial state.

The bureaucratic-imperial state in China was ancient and well-consolidated, and this was reflected in its large degree of control over social elites. The civil elites in China were constituted as a service elite defined in terms of its relation to the state. A formalized hierarchy was in place, with every elite member placed in a graded system of authority, both inside the state bureaucracy and outside it in terms of ranked examination degrees. The precise nature of elite status was made concrete in terms of formal privileges given by the state, as well as by the defined elite role in local governance. Consequently, Chinese elites were dependent on the state for their authority, privilege, and power, which made state and elite interests largely aligned.

In contrast to China, France and the Habsburg Empire were still in the process of developing into bureaucratic-imperial states in our period. Here, the states had to deal with hereditary landed elites like those which had been removed from power in China a millennium earlier. The principle of heredity of elite status was never broken, but nevertheless we can observe movement toward the Chinese model. The time-lag of about a century we observed in chapter 4 between the development of the imperial-bureaucratic state in France and the Habsburg Empire, is also evident in the elite sphere – in every aspect the creation of a service elite was far more progressed in the former than in the latter, but nevertheless the two states moved in similar directions. The state increasingly took over the task of defining elite status in terms of formalized hierarchies and privileges. In France, a new elite group of officials ennobled by the state, the nobility of the robe, became increasingly prominent, both numerically and in terms of influence. In the Habsburg Empire, this process only took off from the mid-18th century onwards, and remained in its infancy throughout our period.

This is not to say that the French, and to a lesser degree Habsburg, elites became trapped in a ‘gilded cage’ by the state. Generally, elites gained immensely by being connected with a newly powerful state, which reinforced their local power and wealth, though at the expense of a reduced autonomy. The state simply acted as a machine through which elites increasingly had to exercise their power in a more well-defined system. In that sense,

we can speak of the bureaucratic-imperial state as “a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination”, as envisioned by Perry Anderson.⁶⁶⁵

Gellnerian elite culture

Another thing to note is the role of the state in fostering a state-wide high culture through which it is able to counteract elite localism. Distinct elite cultures are of course a near-universal phenomenon, but in the context of the bureaucratic-imperial state and its court as the locus of elite interaction, the extent of the high culture tends to increasingly coincide with territorial boundaries of the state and be organized around the person of the Monarch. To do so, it needs to be both horizontally inclusive, in order to let elite members from disparate territories form a unified cultural group, and vertically exclusive, in order to make entry into this culture attractive.

China again provides the purest example of this, with its Confucian culture spread throughout the empire by way of the imperially sponsored examination system. Confucian culture was universal, in the sense that it was theoretically accessible to everyone, while at the same time it stressed and reinforced traditional social hierarchies revolving around the imperial throne. In this way it served to integrate elites coming from widely different backgrounds into a single social order.

The fostering of a distinct culture among elites was also central to state formation in both France and the Habsburg Empire. The evolution of ‘court societies’ in both Paris and Vienna brought elites from all over their respective realms together in a single social circle centered on the monarchs.⁶⁶⁶ Elites thus became uprooted from their local identities and part of a more free-floating elite ‘aristocracy’. A part of this transition was the growing focus on elite education evidenced in both cases, which served to inculcate noble children in the culture and languages of power. In the Habsburg case, the other side of the coin consisted of increasingly reorienting elites from a more broadly European elite culture toward one more contained within the territory of the state. One might venture that the importance placed by the French and Habsburg states in ensuring religious

⁶⁶⁵ Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*.

⁶⁶⁶ Cf. Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*.

unity was connected with the central role of Catholicism in this elite culture.⁶⁶⁷

One could easily read into this development the beginnings of a nationalization of culture, but this is to miss the mark. The crucial aspect to remember here is the vertically exclusivist nature of the established elite cultures. As much as they served to integrate elites into state-wide cultural spheres, they served to exclude the majority of the population from participation. Court cultures were decidedly hierarchical, and required massive economic, social, and cultural capital to master. Only in the 19th century, with the advent of mass communication and industrialization, did elite culture seep into the masses, and not in a straightforward manner, as is clear from the later fate of the Habsburg Empire.

Commercialization and traditional elites

Over the 17th and 18th centuries, the growing commercialization of the economy impacted elites in a variety of manners. This is clearly visible in the French and Chinese cases, and less so in the Habsburg case, where commercialization had never advanced to the level of the former two societies.

Commercialization changed landholding patterns away from a manorial, paternalistic structure toward land being treated as an object of commercial investment. Elites were part of this change, as they moved to the cities and bought and sold land on the market as commercial investors. Increasingly, elites diversified their investments by engaging in finance or even to a lesser degree put their money in commercial ventures, often through straw men or less privileged family members in order to avoid social stigma.

At the same time, the state provided openings for commercial elites to enter the political elite. In China, formal exclusion from the examination system of men with commercial backgrounds had ended by the Ming dynasty, so throughout the Qing commercial families attained elite status in large numbers. In France, men of commercial wealth could obtain nobility by purchase. The Habsburg Empire followed slowly by ennobling a few men with commercial backgrounds from the late 18th century. Social and political limitations on the commercial activity of elites generally remained

⁶⁶⁷ Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," 57–9.

in place, so a family's entry into the elite was normally preceded by divestments of commercial capital as well as the covering of their commercial tracks. In this way, formal social stratification between landholding elites and commercial groups were kept in place, while also providing opportunities for individual social mobility between groups.

The influx of commercial wealth, elite urbanization, and the expanded role of the elites as state servitors provided the conditions for a cultural change among the elites in the direction of more urban or 'bourgeois' values. This is evident in the growing focus on education and literary abilities as the way to enter public life we see present in especially France, while Chinese elites had long been looking in that direction.

Despite all this, commercialization did not change the basic fact that landholding still constituted the primary economic base of elite dominance. This is of course what we should expect given that all three societies remained primarily agricultural economies. The forms of landownership changed, but landholding still acted as a secure investment which could provide a stable source of wealth. Elite society similarly remained ideologically connected to agriculture despite the disparate origins of individual families. Landed dominance in fact often provided the basis for the commercial activities of elites, as the local positions of power afforded by their dominant role in agricultural society provided opportunities for shaping markets in their own interest. Landed and commercial wealth was therefore often closely intertwined with each other as well as with political power.⁶⁶⁸

Caste as a tool for military professionalism

Certain common dynamics between our three cases are also visible in the realm of military elites. Even though operating out of very different contexts, and in neither case taken to its extreme, we can observe a pattern of separation of civil and military elites, and the formation of a group of military elites on caste-like lines. In China, the conquering Bannermen were organized as an exclusive, hereditary social group providing the military backbone of the Qing state. In France, as the nobility of the robe increasingly dominated the civil administration, the old nobility of the sword was sharpened into a state-serving military caste, with the exclusion of newly ennobled and commoners from the officer class. In the Habsburg Empire,

⁶⁶⁸ For a related argument in a different comparative context, see Bang, *The Roman Bazaar*.

as the old nobility dominated civil administration, a new social group of military elites were instituted, though this group remained substantially more inclusive than in either China or France.

The overarching intention behind the emergence of all three patterns of military-elite formation was to ensure a professional military administration, untainted by the perceived corruptions connected with civil and commercial life, and solely dedicated to military matters. In France and China, by the late 18th century, caste was thus seen as a perfectly acceptable solution to the problem of ensuring professionalism. If this was not so in the Habsburg Empire, it was only because there existed no military elite group that could be closed.

Traditional elites in flux

All in all, this comparative study of elite formation in China, France, and the Habsburg Empire shows a clear pattern of convergence. Differences of course persisted, but the general pattern is one of 1) an increasing role of the state in shaping elites, 2) an increasing role of the state and the court as a locus of elite orientation, 3) an increasing formalization and hierarchization of political elites, 4) an increasing commercialization of elite economic activity, and 5) an increasing separation of military and civil elites into distinct groups.

In all these developments, China seems to have been substantially ‘ahead’, though of course that term can be somewhat misleading. This points to an important conclusion – that we should not interpret or connect these phenomena with any notion of modernization. Some may have been helpful in, or even necessary for, subsequent modernization, but this does not mean that they carried any modernizing essence in themselves.

Neither should we interpret these similar developments as global phenomena of ‘early modernity’.⁶⁶⁹ Between our three cases, the timing and advance of the observed developments were substantially disjunct, some aspects by nearly a millennium. Mostly they grew out of internal developments, and were in any case not clearly dependent on any ‘early modern global connectivity’. What we observe here is rather a continuation of pre-modern dynamics of elite formation in the context of similarly pre-modern state building and commercialization. Traditional elites were far from

⁶⁶⁹ Cf. my discussion of Lieberman, *Strange Parallels* in the previous chapter.

stagnant, and acted as both the products and the agents of change through pre-modernity.

Conclusion

En vous instruisant en philosophe de ce qui concerne ce globe, vous portez d'abord votre vue sur l'Orient.

When you consider this globe as a philosopher, you first direct your attention to the East.

- Voltaire, *Essai sur les Mœurs*, 1754

In the 19th century, the world was remade. By the combined powers of science and industry, European societies were transformed beyond recognition. And by their ensuing subjugation of the rest of civilization, either by military force or by the “heavy artillery” of “cheap commodity prices”, as Marx and Engels put it, Europeans in turn transformed the world.

In the revolutionary fires of modernization erupting everywhere, the world of pre-modernity was destroyed. The economic, political, and ideological systems that had governed human civilization for millennia melted into air. In this process, also the Europeans’ image of their own history was transformed. From across this historical divide, it seemed natural to assume that all that had gone before was simply a prelude to the advent of modernity. History itself, in other words, was thus remade in the image of modernity.

In this thesis, I have attempted to dig beneath the layers of modernocentric history shrouding the world of pre-modernity. Through a comparative analysis of developments in the economic, political and social spheres in 17th- and 18th-century China, France, and the Habsburg Empire, I have argued how these can be understood as the workings of essentially pre-modern dynamics of change and stability. And I have attempted to show how these dynamics have been obscured by teleological assumptions arising from the modernocentric grand narrative still structuring Global- and World History.

To do this, as Voltaire instructed in the above quotation, I have directed my attention to the East. China has, indeed, long acted as a mirror for European history. In the modernocentric historiography, China was often presented as a case of failure, a society which had had its way to modernity

obstructed by some detrimental social configuration or another. However, it was precisely the social configurations that made China appear as a failure to modern scholars that made it such a successful formation in the pre-modern world it inhabited. In China, we can find an instructive example of an advanced, pre-modern society independent of any process of modernization. Historical scholarship of the recent decades has only begun to explore the crucial implications to World History that arises from engaging comparatively with the history of such non-European societies. This thesis represents my contribution to the study of these implications.

Modernocentrism

To make sense of the teleological problems connected with the framing of world history as the origin story of modernity, I have introduced the concept of modernocentrism. Modernocentrism, in essence, denotes the tendency to measure every historical change by its relation to modernity. It is the sense one gets from much scholarship of 'looking back' from the precipice of modernity to determine the relevance and ultimately the 'meaning' of historical phenomena, rather than looking forward from the events themselves. It is what makes of every economic history a history of capitalism, market society or the industrial revolution; of every history of state formation a history of the nation-state; and of every history of elites a history of the bourgeoisie.

In the previous chapters, we have seen how modernocentrism has influenced scholarship on all our three cases. In the economic sphere, it has led to an unhelpful conceptual dichotomy of development and stagnation, with no place offered to notions of pre-modern change. In the political sphere, it has led to unreasonable expectations of the power of central bureaucracies. And in the realm of elite studies, it has led to a negligence of the power of traditional, landed elites.

Of course, history must always be, in a sense, *our* history. And as men and women living in the modern world, the historical problem of how that world came into being remains essential to us. But a part of the historical sciences 'growing up' in the modern world, so to speak, is the realization that most of history is simply not about us. Modernocentrism is to liken with the 'childhood disease' of evolutionary biology that presented humankind as the pinnacle of evolution, and saw all of evolutionary history leading inexorably toward our eventual emergence. The emergence of mo-

ernity, like the evolutionary history of modern humans, naturally constitutes an important problem in its own right. But it should not form the basis from which we engage the totality of pre-modern history. The history of pre-modernity is relevant, not only as a genealogy of our modern condition, but as a repository of the immensely diverse wealth of social formations that have existed through the ages.

Continuity and discontinuity

The ever more popular periodization of the centuries preceding the industrial revolution as an ‘early modernity’ is a prime example of modernocentrism, and consequently needs to be abandoned. Although the problems concerning its use as a period in world history have been noted by many scholars⁶⁷⁰, even as a strictly European periodization it is burdened by too much teleological expectation to be useful. Instead, I have opted to use the term ‘late pre-modernity’ to cover the same period. This periodization flips the pattern of continuity and discontinuity implicit in the notion of an early modernity, and affirms the period’s broad continuity with the past, rather than its connection with the future.

The 17th and 18th centuries *were* characterized by a great continuity with earlier centuries. Change in both the economic, political, and social realms largely followed already established patterns across all three cases. However, as I have argued, it is a profound mistake to interpret this continuity as evidence for a long history of modernization, as is so often done in the literature. Rather, it should be taken as a reaffirmation of the 19th century as the great historical divide between the pre-modern and the modern. Continuity over the late pre-modern period implies a greater discontinuity with period that followed it. The stronger the discontinuity, however, the harder it becomes to explain. This calls for some clarification.

Modernity, of course, did in some way emerge from pre-modernity. But it did so not as a natural outcome of the processes described here, or as the next ‘stage’ in a generalized pattern of social evolution. In truth, modernity, like the evolution of modern humans, was the result of an aberrant development. Whether the emergence of modernity should be understood as a specifically British phenomenon, and thus *geographically* external to our cases, or as a general European one, and only *analytically* external, is a question that cannot be answered here. What can be said is that it was at least

⁶⁷⁰ e.g. Ng, “The Epochal Concept of ‘Early Modernity’”; Goldstone, “The Problem of the ‘Early Modern’ World”; Bang, *Irregulare Aliquod Corpus?*, 1:47–55.

an external phenomenon to the dynamics of economic development and state- and elite formation at work in all our three cases. The roots of modernity, in short, are not to be found here. They may very well be found elsewhere, say in the evolving intellectual tradition connected to the scientific revolution. If modernity was in this way or another somehow bubbling up from underneath European society, its influence remained peripheral to economic, political, and social developments through the 17th and 18th centuries.

Population and economic development

The pattern of pre-modern continuity is clearest in the economic history of our three cases, which also presents us with the greatest similarities between them. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, we have observed a Boserupian dynamic of demographic expansion resulting in both agricultural intensification and a growing commercialization of the economy. The power of the Boserupian framework, as developed here, lies in its integration of the commercial and manufactural spheres with the agrarian economy, which in the pre-modern world at all times formed the basis of the economic system. In this way, we become able to make sense of the seemingly contradictory evaluations of the economic performance of all three cases. The increasing misery of the peasant population was directly linked to the expansion of manufacture and the growing commercialization of the period, which makes any generalized notion of ‘progress’ meaningless.

This perspective can be generalized to the entire agrarian age between the Neolithic and the industrial revolution. The most notable pattern of cumulative development throughout this age is the slow expansion of the agrarian population, both into new territories and by filling up already cultivated lands. Over time, cultivation practices intensified everywhere, so increasingly the biblical curse upon Adam that he would eat his food (of declining quality) “by the sweat of your brow” became true of the human condition. Simultaneously, denser populations enabled the world to become increasingly bound together by commercial networks, though these remained fairly limited in strength due to the fundamental constraints on mobility inherent in the pre-modern world.

The 17th and 18th centuries represent the climax of this continuous development, not because it was ‘completed’ or fully developed in any sense, but because its further development was cut short by the intrusion of modernity in the 19th century. It is thus no surprise that the late pre-modern

world saw population, commercialization, and manufacture reach new heights of intensity, as these were continually increasing. No notion of a demographic, commercial, or industrious revolution is needed to explain this, and it tells us very little about the emergence of modernity.

Dynamics of state formation

The patterns of state formation in 17th- and 18th-century China, France, and the Habsburg Empire present a somewhat more complex picture. On one level, France and the Habsburg Empire in this period can be thought of as converging on the bureaucratic-imperial model of rule exemplified by China. This model involved rule through somewhat abstract bureaucracies, the taxation of agricultural land as the central source of revenue, the maintenance of a standing army, and a system of differentiated rule structured in concentric circles surrounding the imperial center. On another level, a clear divergence appeared in the capacities for resource extraction and military mobilization between France and the Habsburg Empire on the one hand, and China on the other.

What are we to make of this convergent-cum-divergent development? The emergence of the bureaucratic-imperial state in both China and Europe can be seen as an example of convergent evolution. Faced with similar problems of internal control, the bureaucratic-imperial model offered an effective approach to securing internal stability in a complex society. The peculiar state forms of medieval Europe, with their non-monopolization of the sources of social power, in the terminology of Michael Mann, over the late pre-modern era slowly gave way to the more stable “recurrent Leviathan” of the bureaucratic-imperial state.⁶⁷¹

This development of the French and Habsburg states occurred in the context of an intense interstate competition, which also explains the divergence in fiscal-military capacities. The constant military threat to these two states necessitated an immense expansion in army sizes, the cost of which required them to push resource extraction to its limits. This militarization, however, was undertaken by purely pre-modern means, and it came at a cost to the internal stability of the regimes. The dynamic of interstate competition was inherently unstable on the macro-level, firstly because it led to this internal instability, and secondly because competition ultimately

⁶⁷¹ Eich, Schmidt-Hofner, and Wieland, *Der Wiederkehrende Leviathan*.

tends to produce winners and losers. In a global perspective, similar dynamics therefore always resulted in the collapse of the system, usually leading to the establishment of an empire, as it had done in China two millennia before. The natural end-point of this dynamic was thus not the modern nation-state, but ultimately its own collapse.

Traditional elites

The formation of societal elites in all our cases is heavily bound up on the twin processes of the emergence (or continuation) of the bureaucratic-imperial state and the increasing commercialization of the economy. The bureaucratic-imperial state functioned by orienting social elites toward the state through a variety of means. Physically this was done by establishing a lavish court that acted as a center of elite attention and acted as a ‘fountain of privilege’. More broadly, through the formalization of elite status, the institution of similarly formalized elite hierarchies, and the careful delimitation of the privileges connected with elite status, the state acted as the ultimate source and guarantor of elite privilege in society. The power of local elites was thus enacted more through the state than in opposition to it. Additionally, the bureaucratic-imperial state acted as a sponsor of a high culture, which could provide a cultural unification of the various local elites spread across its territories. China, with its bureaucratic-imperial state reaching back centuries if not millennia, had gone farthest in this direction, but developments in 17th- and 18th-century France and the Habsburg Empire trended toward similar patterns. Also here we see a gradual monopolization of the sources of social power over time, and thus a gradual convergence on the Chinese pattern.

Simultaneously with these developments, we can observe the effects of commercialization on the elites in all three cases. Patterns of elite landholding changed toward land being treated more like an object of investment on the part of the elites. Commercial and financial activities were also increasingly undertaken by elites, though as a rule it remained socially disparaged. And families of commercial wealth were offered openings into the elite, replenishing their numbers. Following the differentiated impact of commercialization across the three societies, the commercialization of the elites had proceeded further in China than in France, and least far in the Habsburg Empire. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the primary economic basis of elites in all three societies remained landholding throughout this period. As the economies remained fundamentally agrar-

ian, landholding was far from being displaced as the main economic activity of the elites. Furthermore, the commercial activities of the elites were generally dependent on their domination of either the land or the levers of political power, as it often resulted from their ability to distort local markets for their own gain.

Also in the elite sphere, then, were the developments of the 17th and 18th centuries broadly continuous with earlier trends, the product of essentially pre-modern developments in the political and economic spheres. We have no need of the framework of modernization in order to understand these transformations, which can be easily accommodated within pre-modernity.

Late pre-modernity in World History

What can we learn from these conclusions about the place of the late pre-modern period in the greater structure of world history? In order to get a broad perspective, let us first zoom out to the farthest possible view. Human history can be separated into four great epochs. The first epoch is the exceedingly long stretch of time before the Neolithic revolution somewhere around 10,000 BCE, though subject to local variation in timing. The second epoch stretches from the Neolithic to the Urban revolution of c. 3000 BCE, where cities and states first emerged. The third epoch is the agrarian age of civilization stretching from that time until the Industrial revolution of c. 1800 CE. And the fourth, and current, epoch is the age of modernity. Each of these four epochs was governed by distinct evolutionary dynamics, and the transitions between them represent the greatest discontinuities of historical time.

The 17th and 18th centuries studied here thus represent the final moments of the great agrarian epoch. Late pre-modernity can thus be thought of as the climax of the agrarian epoch, if only because of its subsequent transition into modernity, and not because it represented an inherent end-point in itself. In late pre-modernity, new patterns of response to old dynamics appeared, as they continually did, growing new 'branches' of the evolutionary tree of agrarian history. States spread out to cover new territories on every continent except Antarctica, and commercial links between every part of the world strengthened. But these developments did not represent a prelude to modernity. The dynamics governing late pre-modernity were substantially the same, pre-modern dynamics that had been governing historical change through millennia. Their resultant trajectories of change led

not toward modernity, but toward the continuation, extension, and further development of the pre-modern, agrarian world.

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Abstract

In World History, the 17th and 18th centuries represent an ambivalent period, conceptually caught between the realms of tradition and modernity. Conventionally, European scholarship has interpreted major developments of this period through a framework of modernization, with the conceptualization of the period as an ‘early modernity’ gaining ground. In recent decades the notion of an early modernity has been extended to serve as a framework for global history as well.

This thesis challenges these frameworks of modernization and early modernity on the grounds of their inherent teleological problems. Instead, it argues that the major developments of the 17th and 18th centuries can be largely accounted for in terms of the continuous workings of pre-modern dynamics of change and stability. The argument of the thesis is structured around a comparative analysis of processes of economic development, state formation, and the formation of social elites in China, France, and the Austrian Habsburg Empire, c. 1650-1800. By departing from the usual pattern of East-West comparison and using China as the model case for the analysis, the thesis provides a new perspective on the major developments in the period, stressing their deep continuities with pre-modernity.

In the economic sphere, it is argued that developments in China, France, and the Habsburg Empire were mainly driven by a shared agrarian dynamic, in which population growth resulted in agricultural intensification, the growth of manufacture, and an increasing commercialization of society, including social elites. Similar dynamics of state formation resulted in a convergence of state forms across the three cases on the model of the ‘bureaucratic-imperial state’. This also resulted in a similar convergence of state-elite relations. Conversely, the period saw a divergence in state capacities for military mobilization and resource extraction, with China imposing far less on local society than both France and the Habsburg Empire. It is, however, argued that this divergence can ultimately be contained within a pre-modern framework of historical change.

Finally, these conclusions are drawn together to argue for a reconceptualization of the period as ‘late pre-modernity’, a period characterized by the continuation and extension of the pre-modern, agrarian social formations.

Resumé

Det 17. og 18. århundrede udgør en ambivalent periode i historien, fanget mellem tradition og modernitet. I europæisk historieskrivning er tidens store forandringer almindeligvis blevet tolket som modernisering, og i stigende grad bliver der talt om perioden som ”tidlig modernitet”. I nyere globalhistorie er den tidlige modernitet endog blevet fortolket som et globalt fænomen.

Denne afhandling udgør en kritik af disse forståelsesrammer, der må opfattes som udtryk for en teleologisk tilgang til verdenshistorien. De større udviklingstendenser, der gjorde sig gældende i det 17. og 18. århundrede, bliver her i stedet forklaret som udslag af førmoderne udviklingsdynamikker. Afhandlingens kerne udgøres af en komparativ analyse af økonomisk udvikling, statsdannelse og dannelsen af samfundseliter i Kina, Frankrig og det østrigske Habsburgerrige i perioden ca. 1650-1800. Modsat tidligere traditioner for komparation, hvor Europa tages som udgangspunkt, tager afhandlingens analyse udgangspunkt i Kinas udvikling. Dette bidrager med et nyt perspektiv på tidens udviklinger, der lægger vægt på deres grundlæggende kontinuitet med det førmoderne.

Økonomisk udvikling i både Kina, Frankrig og Habsburgerriget var i denne periode grundlæggende styret af en fælles udviklingsdynamik, hvor befolkningsvækst førte til intensivering af landbruget, vækst i manufakturvirksomhed samt øget kommercialisering af samfundet, herunder samfundseliterne. Sammenlignelige statsdannelsesprocesser førte til en konvergerende udvikling i de tre samfund imod dannelsen af bureaukratisk-imperiale statsformer. Dette indebar desuden en lignende konvergens inden for relationerne mellem stat og eliter. Omvendt var perioden dog også karakteriseret af en fortløbende divergens i staternes evner til at mobilisere både ressourcer og militære midler. Hvor staten i Frankrig og Habsburgerriget kontinuerligt øgede sine ressourcemæssige og militære kapaciteter, var den kinesiske stat langt mindre indtrængende i lokalsamfundet. I sidste ende kan denne divergens dog også forklares inden for en førmoderne tolkningsramme.

Afslutningsvis sættes disse konklusioner i perspektiv, og der argumenteres for en omdefinering af tidsperioden som ”sen førmodernitet”, en periode præget af en kontinuerlig udvikling og udvidelse af førmoderne, agrare samfundsformer.